

## Gulf Islands National Seashore

Gulf Islands National Seashore, Florida, U.S.

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April 25, 2017 by [Scott Gilbertson](#)

I could spend all day floating in the Gulf of Mexico. Coming from the Pacific I sometimes sneer at places without waves. Waves humanize the ocean, they give it rhythm, maybe even rhyme and reason. Especially big waves.

The Gulf though. It's not much for waves, a little chop that tries to be wave like. Still, there is something utterly tranquilly magic about just floating there on your back, staring up the occasional Brown Pelican or tern hunting for fish.



Or at least it seems like it would be, unfortunately I don't float for more than about five seconds. I do enjoy sit-floating in the shallows, watching the birds drift by overhead, especially Ospreys, which are in abundance around here. Having spent considerable time watching Ospreys over the last few weeks I've decided that, should I get the chance to have another go on this planet, I'd like to do it as an Osprey.

We ended up staying four extra days at the beach house in St. George Island. Some friends from Atlanta came down for the last couple of days and then we hit the road again, headed for the Fort Pickens area of Gulf Islands National Seashore.

I am, and will continue to be, an advocate of taking the back roads. However, there are exceptions and Florida's 98 — not really a back road, but the only option other than I10 — is a horrid disaster of a road. It was so bad I'm not even going to describe it. I'll just say that if I had it to do over again I'd take I10. Although I don't know, Florida drivers are so consistently bad I'm not sure I'd want to see them going over 60. I've been to 45 states and Florida drivers are without question and by a very large margin consistently the worst drivers I've ever had the misfortune to drive among. I've also never seen so much garbage hurled from moving cars. Stay classy Florida.



Florida, where the 70s never stopped.



You don't see these much any more either.

Despite the horror of Florida roads and the drivers on them we did eventually though we made it to Gulf Islands National Seashore, which might be the prettiest beach I've been to in the U.S. It's downright stunning, if you plunked me here I might guess I was in Thailand though the dunes provide a clue, the dunes are unmistakably Gulf coast barrier island dunes.

In some ways Gulf Islands is probably what St. George was like 60-70 years ago. Take away the houses and St George wouldn't be all that different. St. George is darker though, more stars. I've never been anywhere on the east coast with more stars visible than St. George.

We ended up in a really nice partially shaded spot in the Fort Pickens campground, about a three minute walk from the shoreline. Not a mosquito to be found and steady breeze to keep things nice and cool. Approaching perfection.





The weather largely held too, we had couple days of clouds here and there, but that just meant we got the beach to ourselves. If you're willing to put up with the occasional spit of rain, you can have an entire barrier island to yourself down here. Or at least it feels that way. I spent several hours on the beach one day with the girls and we didn't see another soul.





If all this sounds wonderfully Idyllic there is one, occasional, catch. This particular barrier island is right off the coast of Pensacola, home of a rather large naval air station, a rather large naval air station that happens to be home to the Blue Angels. Just down the road there's an air force base that's home to the Thunderbirds. Twice a week, two times a day, for the better part of two hours you get a free air show, whether you want it or not. We even got to see the Blue Angels flying in formation with the Thunderbirds, which I'm pretty sure doesn't happen at air shows.



I have mixed feelings about watching 40 million dollar killing machines burn through millions more dollars in jet fuel for the sole purpose of entertainment, but the kids thought it was pretty cool. Or at least they were entertained until they noticed a Great Blue Heron that was going around to all the fishermen and women on the pier and trying to steal their fish.







I thought we had a close encounter with a Heron at the cabin the swamp, but that was nothing compared to this. This bird had no fear and seemed to barely care about our existence. It came within arms reach — and Great Blue Herons are very big birds — and just stared, craning its neck around, always keeping an eye on all the buckets of fish around the pier.





Fort Pickens itself is fairly uninteresting — big cannons, brick walls, people fighting, same old tired story — but the views from the top are nice.



Fort Pickens, war, blah blah blah, but on a long enough time scale life always wins.

We're living with just a starting battery. Buying an isolator and house deep cycle battery is on the short list of things to do, but for now we have start up the bus every so often to make sure the starting battery doesn't get too low. It gives me a chance to slowly acclimate the kids to riding in the bus.





Going for a drive.



Not sure where they got the idea, but fixing the bus is one of their favorite games now.



4 Comments



Drew Eldridge May 01, 2017 at 3:01 p.m.

Its time to get a super wide angle lens and capture some of those stars. So many possibilities open up at night. I love reading your adventures.



[Scott](#) May 02, 2017 at 7:45 a.m.

@Drew- That's definitely on my list of things to figure out. I know nothing about astrophotography though, gotta do some research before we get out west to the really dark places.

I have a couple lenses that might work, a 20mm f/4 and a cheap Russian 12mm fisheye. The fisheye comes with a free softening filter for any aperture wider than f/11 :), but it might work.



Drew Eldridge May 02, 2017 at 8:53 a.m.

Its not difficult. Turn your ISO up as high as it will go. Even 3200 and 6400 work. Everything is grainy but its super dark and you cant tell.

Tripod

Use a delayed timer or a switch to fire the shutter. Set the 20mm up at about 25 seconds. Once you go longer than that you will get star trails (which can be awesome anyway).

Get a good (free) astro app for your phone. It will show you what you are looking at, where the milky way is, what time the milky way will be prime in your spot, etc.



[Scott](#) May 02, 2017 at 10:00 a.m.

@Drew-

Cool, thanks. That's not too hard. I'll give that a try. We're on Dauphin Island right now, which isn't super dark and has the offshore derricks lit up at night, but maybe I can get something to work.