

Beach Riding: A Postcard Moment.

Life's a Beach

By Georgia Brown

Will this be the year that you ride where the sun hits the sand and your face is cooled by sea breezes? Will you be there as a couple on a moonlit ride, or trotting in the surf with best friends?

The Southeast has some of the most spectacular stretches of sandy beach anywhere - just waiting for you to explore. If you haven't figured out where to go yet, we've collected some suggestions from people who are eager to share their know-how.

Bringing your own horse (BYOH)

If your horse is not a seasoned trail horse or comfortable walking through water, you might want to consider what he'll be thinking when he sees that strange, white, foamy water, hears the sounds of waves breaking on the beach and inhales funny fishy smells. Think about it - given his nature, your horse wouldn't be on the beach, he'd be grazing safely behind the dunes on green grasses.

Whether you BYOH or take a vacation and ride someone else's well trained mount, follow this guide and you'll find the ride of your dreams.
Florida's Panhandle Region

Cape San Blas, Gulf County

Sometimes called Florida's Forgotten Coast, the pristine, protected coastline of Gulf County offers about three hours of riding on some of the most remote beaches anywhere. Salinas Park, the beach access for horses, is on a thin peninsula of sand known as Cape San Blas and is near Port Saint Joe. Finding it requires a trip off the beaten path, through forests of skyscraping pines and magnolias. At the reclusive end of the cape are 1,650 acres of wilderness area. In summer, you'll see flags marking turtle nests, which are monitored during the nesting season by turtle watch patrols.

Florida's Horse Friendly Beaches

BYOH Salinas Park , Cape San Blas

The park has a trailer parking area, water, grills, and covered picnic tables. To bring your own horse, get a Beach Riding Permit at the Gulf County Courthouse, Room 100, downtown Port St. Joe., in advance of your trip. Bring proof of Coggins and vaccination records. Horses must wear tail bags, i.e. diapers. County residents pay \$15 annually per horse

and all others pay \$150. The beach is patrolled, so keep your permit with you when you ride. Call (850)229-6652 for more information as regulations change and visit the Gulf county website at www.visitgulf.com.

Photo courtesy of Gulf County TDC

Riders take a leisurely stroll along Gulf County's Forgotten Coast.

Broke-a-Toe Stable, Cape San Blas

Meet Kymber of Broke-a-Toe Stable at Salinas Park, and you can cross the dunes and be out on the beach in just minutes. She enjoys pointing out sea loving eagles, dolphin and shore birds, plus the treasure trove of seashells underfoot. In business for 10 years, her horses are well trained and safe for beginners. Kymber is known for rescuing neglected horses and fattening them up on Seminole Feed, which she buys from Bo's Livestock Feed & Supply in Panama City. She's trained several of them for new lives with new owners. Rates are \$40 per hour, \$55 for 1 ½ hours, and \$70 for 2-hour rides. She recommends late afternoon or before sunset and her favorite months are late October and November when the weather is cool. For more information contact Kymber Lewandowski at (850) 899-RIDE (7433).

Fantasea Beachrides, Cape San Blas

Sighting dolphins and bald eagles are just some of the pleasures of riding the Cape San Blas beaches according to Laurie Shearer. Laurie has been escorting people for 10 years on day and moonlight rides. Summer is peak season, but spring and fall are ideal. Rates are \$35 for one hour, \$50 for 1 ½ hours or \$60 for 2 hours. If you would like to board your horse in the area, call Laurie Shearer for recommendations at (850)527-6596 or (850) 527-9563.

Hoofprints in the Sand, Wewahitchka

This is a family-owned operation that offers a horse experience for every age. You can ride up to three hours on American Quarter Horses with their friendly guides. Sunset rides are popular. Rates are \$35 for 1 hour; \$50 per person for 1 ½ hours. For more information, contact Terry & Sandy Dewberry, 180 Gladstone Lane, Wewahitchka, Florida, 32465, Phone (850)227-5454 or (850)639-5699, Website www.hoofprintsintheland.com. Florida's Treasure Coast

South Hutchinson Island, Fort Pierce

There is a long history of people bringing their horses to beaches in St. Lucie County. Today the only county beach that allows horseback riding is Frederick Douglass Memorial Beach, named in honor of Frederick Douglass, a leading spokesperson for racial equality in the 1800s.

BYOH Frederick Douglass Memorial Park, Ft. Pierce

The facilities on South Hutchinson Island include trailer parking, hitching post, water, restrooms, showers and a picnic pavilion. Only 15 horses are allowed on the beach each day so you will need a reservation. Permits can be purchased in advance at the St. Lucie County Recreation Department at 1302 Virginia Avenue (State Road 70) in Ft. Pierce. Keep your permit with you and read the permit packet, which includes turtle watch information. The annual fee is \$50 if you are a county resident or \$100 for nonresidents, for a maximum of 8 horses. Call St. Lucie County Parks & Recreation Department for reservations and more information at (772)462-1521.

Pam Knisley and her Paso Fino mare Sangria de el Dione enjoy the ocean at Fredrick Douglas Memorial Park.

Photo by Darlene Wohlar.

Tours on Horseback, Ft. Pierce

Colleen and Alan Hays have offered tours of the powder-sand beaches of the Atlantic on their trusty, well-trained horses for nine years. The one-hour ride covers a mile and a half of beach with a return trail through Australian pines. Alan gives a knowledgeable ecological narrative on this pristine beach habitat. If it is low tide, the walk-trot ride along the dunes includes a walk in the water. The romance of the beach is not lost on the Hayes - they are experts in planning surprise marriage proposals and have helped organize weddings on this secluded stretch of beach. Reservations are necessary. Cost is \$30 per person and minimum age is 10. If you'd like to bring your horses, contact the Hayes for recommendations on overnight stabling. Colleen and Alan Hayes 87 Pinewood Lane Ft. Pierce, FL 34947, (772) 468-0101 or email chayes1789@aol.com.

Canaveral National Seashore, Volusia County

The horseback riding season on the national seashore near Cape Canaveral is from November 1 to April 30. This glorious stretch of beach is closed to horses in the summer nesting season to protect the Atlantic Ocean's endangered and threatened sea turtles. Unfortunately, the beach was temporarily closed last winter due to hurricane damage. As a result of improved relations between horsemen and park officials, improvements have been made in the staging area.

BYOH Canaveral National Seashore, New Smyrna

Riding on the beach requires a Horse-use Permit. Be sure your horse's Coggins is current, and make reservations in advance because there is a daily limit. Entrance fee is \$5. It is always advisable to call prior to your date of arrival as conditions change. For more information, contact North District Information Center at Apollo Beach, New Smyrna, Florida, (386)

428-3384 Extension 10 or visit www.nps.gov/cana.

Ace of Hearts Ranch, Cocoa

The Ace of Hearts Ranch has been providing beach trail rides at Canaveral for eight years. Sandra Vann has worked with park officials over the years to create a horse-friendly environment. She keeps 25 well cared for horses and is known for her nature-wise beach rides. When the beach opens in November, call for pricing. If you need information about bringing your own horse, Sandra is glad to help. For more information contact Sandra Vann, 7400 Bridal Path Lane, Cocoa, FL 32927, phone (321) 638-0104, or visit www.aceofheartsranch.com.

St. Augustine & Ponte Vedra, St. Johns County

People have been riding horses on the hard-packed sand of St. Johns County beaches near St. Augustine for as long as anyone can remember. The tradition predates the Daytona racing era, and cars are still allowed on Crescent Beach. The county has 42 miles of seashore, lined with ever-bigger homes as well as state and national parks. There are stretches where you will see no one for miles. The local horse council urges riders to be good stewards of the beaches and to respect others, especially when near swimmers or crossing beach access points.

BYOH St. Johns County Beaches, St. Augustine & Ponte Vedra

There are two county parks with parking for trailers and broad paths to the beach. Surfside Park allows riding year round. The riding season at Mickler Beach is Labor Day to spring break. Call for the exact cut-off date in the spring. For more information contact St. Johns County Beach Management Office (904) 471-2770.

Amelia Island, Nassau County

This historic 13.5-mile island on the northern border of Florida has a unique horse ranch located within Amelia Island State Park. Amelia Island, famous for its luxury resorts, golf courses and intriguing B & Bs, offers a peaceful escape for you and your horse at Peter's Point, a Nassau County bathing beach and park.

BYOH Peters Point, Amelia Island

Beach rides begin at Peter's Point where there is a designated horse trailer area with picnic shelters, showers and restrooms. Horses must walk through the 8-acre park to the beach. No riding is allowed near swimming areas or on the dunes. You can ride in either direction for an hour or more, but when you see bathers or fishermen, a good rule of thumb is to walk

your horse toward the dunes, giving them a 30-to-40 foot berth. Turtle nests are flagged by Turtle Watch Patrols. A permit and trailer decal can be purchased at the Nassau County Public Services Building, 96161 Nassau Place in Yulee, Florida. Bring your horse trailer registration, Coggins and health papers. Cost for an annual decal is \$20 for nonresidents. Call (904) 321-5765 for more information.

Ride the Beaches, Amelia Island

Debbie Manser has taken people riding on the island on her Quarter Horses for many years. Recommended by B & Bs in the area, she limits her personalized trail rides to one to three riders. Depending on your skill, you can trot and canter. In summer, she goes out before 10 a.m. or after 5 p.m. , and her favorite time of year is spring and fall at low tide because there is no one on the beach. Rates are \$70 per hour and reservations are required. If you would like to board your horse at a stable in the area, contact Debbie Manser for recommendations at (904) 277-7047 or visit www.ameliahorsebackriding.com.

Circle B Ranch, Amelia Island

Circle B Ranch, a family owned operation run by Bill Crews, his daughter and his brother, specialize in taking small groups on early morning and late afternoon rides where you can ride side by side at the water's edge observing nature's show. Often that includes a school of dolphin keeping pace with your mounts or spotting turtles on the beach in nesting season. There is no charge for pausing to watch nature's show. It's your vacation and the Crews family understands some moments on horseback will become precious memories. Bill drives to Southern Star Feed in Georgia to get his Seminole Feed for his horses. "If you need to fatten up your horse, feed him Seminole," said Bill. Rates are \$50 per hour per horse. Unique moonlight rides are \$75 per hour and feature dinner on the deck of a popular surfside restaurant. There is no charge for waiting time while you dine. Reservations should be made one to two weeks in advance at (904)556-9530.

The Kelly Seahorse Ranch, Amelia Island

The Kelly Seahorse Ranch is a working ranch located within Amelia Island State Park offering the romance of beach horseback riding all year. Trained guides point out dolphins, shorebirds and other island wildlife on the walk-only beach trail. Open seven days a week, guided rides leave daily at 10 a.m. noon, 2 and 4 p.m. Cost is \$45 per person, ages 13 and older. There is a 230-pound weight restriction and a 4'6" minimum height. Reservations should be made several days in advance at (904) 491-5166.

Georgia Beaches

Sea Island & Jeckyll Island

At one time, horsemen could ride on the beaches of Georgia's barrier islands, but gradually this window narrowed and today there are few options left. You can observe a herd of 250 wild horses on Cumberland Island, which is accessible by ferry only, and there are some historic resorts where guests ride on private property.

Florida's Horse Friendly Beaches

Sea Island Resort , Sea Island

The Sea Island Resort Equestrian Center offers beach horseback rides for skilled as well as novice riders; however, you must be a guest of the resort or a member of the club. Guided rides along the marsh, ocean beach and inner dunes are rich in natural history. It is a walk-trot ride, but the guides will tailor the mile and a half beach trail to more experienced riders' skills. Rates are \$75 for 1 ½ hours. They also offer clinics, private instruction and boarding. Call (800) 732-4752 or (912) 638-3611 for reservations for Cloisters and the Lodge and (912) 638-5170 for the Equestrian Center or visit www.seaisland.com.

Victoria's Carriages and Trail Rides, Jekyll Island

Victoria's Carriages and Trail Rides maintain a farm on the mainland with 60 horses of different breeds and trailer them to Jekyll Island. Year-round walk-trot trails go through the maritime forest and along Driftwood Beach. Guides can point out wildlife, including osprey and sometimes bald eagles, as well as deer and raccoons. In the spring, dolphins are active, jumping and cavorting in the water, and in winter, the rare pilot whales have been sighted. Riders meet at a historic carriage house built in 1898 and depart from the Calm Creek picnic area on the north end of Jekyll Island. The hourly rate is \$50; 1 ½ hour beach rides are \$65 and sunset rides are \$55. Call for reservations one or two days in advance and remember tides determine the best time of day to ride. Contact (912) 635-9500 or visit www.victoriascarriages.com.

South Carolina

BYOH Myrtle Beach State Park, Myrtle Beach

Myrtle Beach State Park, located in the heart of The Grand Strand 4 miles south of downtown, is an historic park with Civil Conservation Corps structures built in the 1930s. Horseback riding is allowed from the third Saturday in November to the last day of February. On the beach, you'll ride past one of the last remaining stands of maritime forest in South Carolina. An annual permit is \$25 per horse, plus admission to the park. Groups are limited to six and reservations are necessary. Call for permit

information at (843) 238-5325 and visit www.southcarolinaparks.com.

Inlet Point Plantation, North Myrtle Beach

The Plantation's mission is to make sure that you explore on horseback a breathtaking historic location you won't easily forget. The ride takes you through a 4,000-acre plantation that the owners wish to keep in a wilderness state. Beginning at the stable next to a pecan grove, the plantation trail takes you through a birdwatchers' paradise where you will see deer and even an occasional bear. Cross a bridge to Waites Island, and you ride the wide beaches of a private 1,200-acre island, home to many shore and song birds. The Smiths have 30 horses of several breeds, including Tennessee Walkers, Belgians and Appaloosas. Cantering is allowed if riders are experienced. Advance reservations are required. Rates are \$95 for the 2 ½ hour beach ride and \$45 for a 1-hour ride along the Intracoastal Waterway. For more information visit www.inletpointplantation.com or contact Mark Smith at (843) 249-2989 or email inletstables@aol.com.

BYOH Ride and Camp on the Beach, Myrtle Beach

Joining a Myrtle Beach fundraiser gives you a weekend on the beach with your horse at the 24th Annual Jack Monroe Ride-a-Thon, which benefits the American Heart Association. It will be held November 9-13, 2005. For more on this 20-mile ride call Tammy Eaves at the American Heart Association: (843) 626-3939.

Leave only your hoofprints.

Beachgoers outnumber horsemen by the thousands, and a few complaints could be the death knell for horseback riders. If riders are considerate, the hope is that there will be no necessity for closing beaches or stricter regulations.

Beach Riding Check List

Bring your permit and obey regulations. Don't spoil beach riding for US by violating rules. In some areas, officials are waiting for an excuse to ban horses.

Ride responsibly, especially when sunbathers, fishermen or other groups of horses are present. Walk well around them.

Never ride on the dunes.

Obey clean-up rules in the trailer parking area and on the beach.

Don't use a people shower area for your horse!

Respect and protect turtle nesting areas. In the Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic

Ocean, Leatherback, Loggerhead, Green, Kemp's ridley and Hawksbill turtles are endangered or threatened.

P.S. There are heavy fines for violating park rules. On one beach, the fine for running is \$500.