

TRAVEL 7 REASONS YOU'LL FALL IN LOVE WITH FAIRHOPE, ALABAMA

7 Reasons You'll Fall in Love with Fairhope, Alabama

Pack your bags.

Sid Evans



Photo: Benjamin Callahan

There are lots of good reasons to visit Fairhope, Alabama, especially in the off-season. If you love the Gulf Coast, there are few places more scenic, with antebellum homes, streets lined with live oaks, and a charming, walkable downtown. With a population of about 17,000, Fairhope sits on bluffs that overlook Mobile Bay, so you're never far from a view of the water. It may not have the white sand beaches of the Florida panhandle, but it has a laid-back vibe that lowers your blood pressure—and that may be the only reason you need to go. Nonetheless, here are a few more:



1. Grand Hotel Marriott Resort, Golf Club, & Spa. The Grand is undergoing a \$32 million renovation that's much needed (it's expected to be complete in spring 2018), but what makes this resort so special—and so beloved by generations of Southerners—is its history. Built in 1847, it served as a Confederate hospital during the Civil War, and the hotel's military past is still honored every day with a ceremonial canon firing at 4:00 pm. The sunsets are unmatched, and you can watch them from a brick path that surrounds the property or a long fishing pier that shoots out into Mobile Bay.

2. Bike riding. Fairhope is a biking town, with trails that wind along the coast and through some beautiful historic neighborhoods. Bring your own, **rent** them in town, or, if you're staying at the Grand, get them at no extra charge from the hotel.

3. Panini Pete's. This little café right in the middle of downtown Fairhope is a local institution, and you can see why. Their beignets are perfect – light, flaky, and delicious – and the paninis are good too if you want something savory. Go for breakfast, sit in the courtyard under the large oak tree, and then go for a stroll around town.

4. Page & Palette. Rick Bragg once wrote that “you cannot swing a dead cat without hitting a serious-faced novelist [in Fairhope],” so it makes sense that the town should have a great bookstore. Not only does Page & Palette have signed copies of books by local authors like Bragg, Winston Groom, Howell Raines, Fannie Flagg, and many others, it has a charming and knowledgeable staff that loves to make recommendations, even to kids. Get yourself a latte at their coffee shop, turn off your phone, and spend an hour browsing.

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5. Sunset Pointe Restaurant. A lot of restaurants with great views tend to have mediocre food, but that's not the case at Sunset Pointe. They have a gorgeous, breezy location, right on Fly Creek Marina, and their menu is fresh, inventive, and fun. The Gulf Snapper Throats are the house favorite – a rich, flavorful cut grilled and served with garlic butter – and they make excellent versions of gumbo, a kale salad with fried oysters, and grouper “bights.” If you like bloody marys, they make a mean one, with Cajun spice on the rim.

6. 17 Turtles Gulf Coast Outfitters. The Mobile Tensaw Delta, about half an hour from downtown Fairhope, is one of Alabama's natural wonders. At 260,000 acres, it's one of the most beautiful and diverse ecosystems in the country, and there's no one better to take you there than Jimbo Meador, with 17 Turtles Outfitters. A native of Fairhope who seems to know every bird by name, Meador will guide you through cypress swamps, marshes, and bays where you're likely to see bald eagles, kingfishers, egrets, herons, and ibis—not to mention turtles and alligators. Side note: His deep Alabama accent was studied by Tom Hanks to prepare for **Forrest Gump**.

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7. Bluegill Restaurant. Just outside **Mobile** and perched right on the Delta, the Bluegill feels like it dropped out of a Jimmy Buffett song. With a big deck overlooking the marsh and live music around the clock (think Steve Miller, Joe Cocker, etc), it's the kind of place where no one seems to be in a hurry. They're known for their flaming oysters, which are grilled with butter and parmesan, their gumbo, and their crab claws. Signs around the restaurant warn you not to feed the alligators—advice that I would heed.

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