
CRUISING GUIDE TO THE

**NORTHERN
GULF COAST**

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CRUISING GUIDE TO THE NORTHERN GULF COAST:

**Florida, Alabama,
Mississippi, Louisiana**

FOURTH EDITION

By Claiborne S. Young



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Please note that channel conditions, depths, aids to navigation, and almost all on-the-water navigational data is subject to change at any time. While I have been careful to verify firsthand all navigational information, on-the-water conditions may be quite different by the time of your cruise. Failure to follow current on-the-water reality, even when it differs from the instructions contained in this guide, can result in expensive and dangerous accidents. The author has worked hard to help minimize your risk, but there are potential hazards in any cruising situation, for which captains, navigators, and crew are solely responsible.

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**This book is dedicated to
my frequent companion and research
assistant,**

ANDY LIGHTBOURNE—

a friend and sailor for ALL seasons

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Introduction

It is still a landscape of incredible and heart-stopping beauty, with its dark pines, its flashing water, its vivid yellow sun and the iridescent feathers of its birds. History still waits at the end of every road, whether a paved super-highway . . . or a narrow sand track like those near the little towns. . . . Before twilight the dark clouds have disappeared, and the world is a sparkling mass of raindrops on green leaves as the long rays of the sun play over them. Choruses of frogs and crickets are singing as the evening comes, and in the magenta crepe myrtles brown thrashers buzz. The smell of the grass is damply sweet and the smell of the night cestrum hangs thick and pungent in the blackness that finally descends.

Thus does Gloria Jahoda describe Panhandle Florida in her now classic book, *The Other Florida*. While, to be sure, Ms. Jahoda's description is meant to apply to the little-populated areas of northwestern Florida, she herself notes that the Florida Panhandle is far more akin to the other Northern Gulf states of Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana than the boisterous eastern coast of the Sunshine State.

Cruising captains have long ignored this stretch of green shores and backwater anchorages. Only within the last decade have mariners begun to appreciate its pristine beauty, within easy range of a bevy of marina facilities and uncounted anchorages. The relative isolation of the region has not been all bad news. Cruisers have been able to (and still can) chart their way to many a pleasant overnight stop between Carrabelle and New Orleans and drop their hook where few have

been before them. This can be a very, very special experience in our modern, well-planned world, and I am proud to do my small part to make these waters more accessible to my fellow cruisers.

It must be noted, however, that the last five years have seen a marked increase in development along the Northern Gulf coastline. This writer was shocked to see two low-rise condo complexes on the shores of once-sleepy Carrabelle as we began research for this new edition. While, to be sure, there are still, thankfully, many stretches of the Northern Gulf ICW that remain in their natural state, cruisers who have not plied these waters for several years will be more than slightly surprised to see all the new construction and far more crowded shoreside highways.

The cruising grounds of the Northern Gulf Coast between Carrabelle and New Orleans are truly waters of great contrast. Where else can captain and crew cruise for a single day and pass from the gin-clear, emerald green waters of the Florida Panhandle to the mud-rich brine of Mobile Bay? Another few miles lands you in the wide-open reaches of Mississippi Sound, while another day's cruise will introduce mariners to the almost secret backwater recesses of the wilderness rivers separating Mississippi and Louisiana.

There is something for every cruiser on the varied waters of the Northern Gulf. Those who enjoy anchoring off for the evening will discover a mind-boggling array of overnight havens, particularly on the Florida Panhandle. Many of these anchorages are well off the

beaten path and provide a tangible feeling of isolation. Occasionally it is a long run between stops, but marina facilities are excellent, and cruisers can always be assured that a good marina and/or boatyard is within a few hours' run at most.

In the past, this writer has always shied away from any listing of overnight transient-dockage rates for marinas. These sorts of charges change at such a dizzying speed that any such tabulation would be long out of date by the time the ink in this book was dry. However, for the first time, in this new edition, we are going to institute a very simple transient-dockage fee-rating system. All marinas that provide overnight transient berths will be rated "Expensive," "Average," or "Economy." Hopefully, this simple system will give you at least some idea of what to expect when it comes time to pony up your overnight-dockage bill.

The waters of the Northern Gulf from Carrabelle to New Orleans have many wonderful attributes to recommend them to cruisers. The Florida Panhandle is surrounded by some of the clearest water that this writer has ever witnessed, which, together with the beautiful white sand beaches of the region, make it all too easy to understand why some skippers simply forget to ever come home. Additionally, Panhandle waters are pocked with more gunk holes, side waters, and overnight anchorages than you could shake a gaff at. Seldom before have I seen such a collection of potential havens. Some are located miles from the most remote vestiges of civilization.

Mobile Bay is famous for its rich history and heavy commercial traffic. With appropriate caution, it can be an impressive sight to watch the BIG boys passing carefully up and down the bay.

Mississippi Sound is blessed with some of the most historic cities in the nation. The roads lining the sound's northern shore harbor one of the largest collections of antebellum mansions in the South. Biloxi (say, "bill-LUCK-see") is the second oldest settlement in the continental United States. Its past is prominently on display for visitors to enjoy. Pascagoula, Gulfport, and Bay St. Louis all have their own fascinating heritage, which the historically minded among us can savor with the greatest relish. During times of fair weather, several anchorages bordering the Mississippi Sound barrier islands to the south can also make for a memorable overnight stay.

A decade ago, the state of Mississippi legalized gambling. This has resulted in the construction of more and more mammoth casino complexes along the sound's shoreline, where once there were only charming shrimp trawlers, pleasure-craft facilities, and more than a fair share of historic buildings. If you are one of those cruisers who enjoys gambling and glitzy night life, then this change will be welcome. Everyone else will be far less than happy.

Louisiana offers another round of backwater cruising on the streams around Pearl River and along the northern shores of Lake Pontchartrain. When discussing the attractions of Louisianian waters, however, the lion's share of the attention must fall on New Orleans. We shall explore this fascinating city in the last chapter of this guide. For now we need only note that it is one of the most colorful, historic, changeable, confusing, and fun-loving cities that America has ever known.

In closing this brief review of the Northern Gulf's attractions, we would be remiss without a word about the succulent food available all

up and down the coast. If there is another region of our nation that produces such a consistent supply of gastronomical delights, this writer does not know of it. Whether your pleasure is simple, but ultra-fresh, fried seafood or Creole gumbo or Cajun rice, few palates will come away from the Northern Gulf with anything less than complete satisfaction.

The history of the Northern Gulf Coast is as fascinating as it is complex. The Florida Panhandle was settled by the Spanish and remained, except for a brief (but important) period of British rule, under their control until 1821, when the region finally came under American ownership. What we know today as the states of Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana were settled by an unforgettable collection of Frenchmen. Though the region was to know Spanish rule for many years before coming into the American fold by way of Thomas Jefferson's Louisiana Purchase, the French left their indelible stamp, which can still be heard and seen today in some of the native accents and customs.

Within the body of this guide, I have endeavored to present a cross-section of this rich heritage. Wherever possible, readers are referred to various historical accounts for additional information.

Weather along the Northern Gulf Coast is very different from what might be expected by mariners from more northerly climes. Springs are warm and often humid, with relatively frequent thunderstorms. Nevertheless, this season is considered one of the best cruising times in the region. In the absence of any major storms, there is usually just enough wind for a good sail, and many days are clear and sparkling. Of course, cold fronts and other weather sys-

tems can mar this pattern of good weather, but most skippers will find spring cruising along the Northern Gulf to be a genuine delight.

The long, hot, humid summers can leave cruisers used to cooler climates breathless from the heat. From June through August and well into September, there are many days of calm air, which leave sweltering sailcraft plodding along under auxiliary power. As if that weren't problem enough, frequent afternoon thunderstorms can, and often do, reach violent proportions. They can seemingly come out of nowhere. This writer has huddled miserably in his boat, anchored in the middle of a marsh, while fearfully watching lightning strikes all around his craft. Yet, as little as fifteen minutes before the storm struck, the sun had been shining and the breezes rather light. In another thirty minutes, the maelstrom had departed as if it had never been. Truly, summer cruising along the Northern Gulf should be planned with a ready ear to the latest weather forecast. No matter what the weather folks say though, if a dark cloud comes over the horizon, abandon everything and head for the nearest shelter.

If it were not for one very serious flaw, the weather from October through the first part of December would be a serious contender with the spring months as the best cruising season on the Northern Gulf. The great big exception to this is, of course, the furious tropical giants which we call hurricanes. The season for these great storms stretches from July through November. Any student of the region's history can readily tell you of the many, many hurricanes that have battered the Northern Gulf in years past. In 1995 Hurricanes Erin and Opal dealt a serious blow to the Florida Panhandle, while in 1976 Hurricane Camille laid waste to

a goodly portion of the Mississippi coastline. If the weather service detects one of these giants heading your way, don't muck about. Head for the deepest shelter you can find and don't stick your nose out before the all-clear is sounded.

Winters along the Northern Gulf are short and sweet. While freezes occasionally descend on the coastline, this is a rare happening. Nevertheless, cold weather can sometimes appear, as demonstrated by the ice on Mobile Bay's Dog River in December of 1989. Most of the time, captains and crews with time on their hands can pick and choose their days and continue sailing and cruising right on through the winter months. Of course, if you have a schedule to keep and the weather turns nasty, it could make for a very different story.

Before leaving our consideration of the Northern Gulf weather behind, this writer must mention one additional meteorological phenomenon. Time and time and time again, while performing research for this guide and its subsequent editions, it was brought forcibly to our attention that weather forecasting in this region is anything but accurate. During one two-week period, it finally reached the point where we planned on just the opposite conditions of those predicted by the NOAA broadcasts. I don't know what the problem is, but captains should know that they must take weather forecasts in this region with more than a few grains of salt.

In this guide I have endeavored to include all the information skippers may need to take full advantage of the Northern Gulf's tremendous cruising potential. I have paid particular attention to anchorages, marina facilities, and danger areas. All navigational information necessary for a successful cruise has been included, and these data have been set apart

in their own subsections and screened in gray for ready identification.

Each body of water has been personally visited for the very latest depth information. However, remember that bottom configurations do change. Dockside depths at marinas seem to be particularly subject to rapid variation. Cruisers should *always* be equipped with the latest charts and "Notice to Mariners" before leaving the dock. The gray-scale maps presented in the body of this text are designed to locate anchorages and facilities and give the reader a general knowledge of the coastline. They are not intended for and should not, under any circumstances, be used for navigation.

This guide is not a navigational primer and it assumes that you have a working knowledge of piloting and coastal navigation. If you don't, you should acquire these skills before tackling the coastal waters.

Successful navigation of the Northern Gulf's waters is yet another study in contrasts. To the east, the waters spread about the Florida Panhandle are mostly deep and forgiving. Often, on bright, sunny days, the clear waters allow you to see just where the good depths drop off and shoaling begins. While this "eyeball navigation" can not always be relied upon to keep you out of trouble, it is an invaluable tool in many instances.

While some bodies of water in the Florida Panhandle can produce a healthy chop when winds exceed fifteen knots (St. George Sound, Apalachicola Bay, and Pensacola Bay spring immediately to mind), much of the route is well sheltered from inclement weather.

Mobile Bay introduces cruising captains and their crew to muddy and mostly shallow waters that call for more than their share of

navigational caution. Navigators should plan their cruises carefully and plot any necessary compass courses well ahead of time before venturing out on the bay's open waters.

Mississippi Sound sometimes has the "worst" of both worlds. Not only is the water wide open to the effects of wind and wave, it is also peppered with shoals and underwater obstructions. The ICW runs through the middle of the broad sound. A lengthy run to the north is necessary in order to reach the various sheltered ports of call along the northerly shoreline. Cruising the Mississippi Sound portion of the ICW calls for an attentive ear to the latest forecast and careful advance planning. Check your sounder often and keep a sharp lookout for lateral leeway.

Louisiana again introduces visiting cruisers to mostly deep waters, with the exception of Lake Pontchartrain. This unusually large lake has depths that seldom exceed 15 feet. Couple this relatively thin water with strong afternoon thundershowers and you can readily understand why captain and crew must approach Pontchartrain with the greatest respect.

With some isolated exceptions, currents flow swiftly along the inland waters of the Northern Gulf. All mariners should be alert for the side-setting effects of wind and current. Sailcraft, particularly when cruising under auxiliary power, and single-engine trawlers should be especially mindful of the quickly moving waters.

Cruisers familiar with Florida's eastern coastline will be deliriously happy to learn that there are far fewer no-wake zones and bridges with restricted opening schedules than on their home waters. *Sailcraft should be warned,*

*however, that there are still some **fixed** bridges on the Gulf Coast ICW that have only 50 feet*

of vertical clearance. Fortunately, several of these spans are now being replaced by 65-foot structures, but for the moment at least, sailors who need more than 50 feet of clearance are doomed to frequent offshore jaunts to reach the various ports of call along portions of this coastline.

All navigators should have a well-functioning depth sounder on board before leaving the dock. This is one of the most basic safety instruments in any navigator's arsenal of aids. The cruiser who does not take this elementary precaution is asking for trouble. An accurate knotmeter/log is another instrument that will prove quite useful. It is often just as important to know how far you have gone as to know what course you are following.

The modern miracle of satellite-controlled GPS (Global Positioning System), particularly when interfaced with a laptop computer loaded with the latest digitized nautical charts, is yet another powerful navigational aid. Many captains have already discovered that these electronic marvels can be of immense value when cruising the Northern Gulf coastline, particularly on the wide waters of Mobile Bay, Mississippi Sound, and Lake Pontchartrain.

Since we have been talking about electronic navigation, this would be a good time to announce a new feature in this guide. For only the third time in our series of guidebooks, approximate latitude and longitude positions of marinas and many anchorages have been included. All of these lat/lon positions are included strictly for informational purposes; they must NOT be used as GPS or Loran C way points!

With the phenomenal increase in popularity of computerized navigational software, we

thought it important to provide lat/lon information. For instance, this data can be plugged into Nobeltec's "Navigational Suite" or the "Cap'n" software, and the program will immediately place an icon on the digitized image of the appropriate nautical chart, almost exactly where the marina or anchorage you are making for is located. That's a real, on-the-water advantage, but to be repetitive, *please* don't use this data as simple way points.

There are several reasons why. Loran C and GPS readings give mariners a straight-line distance or bearing to the intended way-point destination. Straight-line tracks do NOT take into account such vagaries as shoals you will need to avoid, peninsulas you will be unable to cross, or islands that just seem to get in the way.

In this guide, lighted daybeacons are always called "flashing daybeacons." I believe this is a more descriptive term than the officially correct designation, "light," or the more colloquial expression, "flasher." Also, to avoid confusion, daybeacons without lights are always referred to as "unlighted daybeacons." Similarly, lighted buoys are called "flashing buoys."

Cruisers who are (or become) regular visitors to the wide and varied waters of the Northern Gulf Coast might want to seriously consider another publication complementary to this guide. *Southwinds* magazine, published out of St. Petersburg, Florida, is a great source for

cruising and racing (under sail) news along this coastline. This publication does a most commendable job of keeping its readers informed about the latest happenings in the boating world from Florida to New Orleans. If all this sounds interesting, subscriptions can be ordered by writing to *Southwinds*, P.O. Box 1190, St. Petersburg, FL 33705 or calling (813) 825-0433.

I can only hope that you, my fellow cruisers, will have as much fun exploring the waters between Carrabelle and New Orleans as I have had in researching them for you. It is my sincere belief that you will never find so many contrasting waters in so short a space of coastline anywhere else in the world. And, just in case your appetite is not yet sufficiently whetted, consider Gloria Jahoda's immortal description of her first autumn along the Northern Gulf Coast:

The pines were shining and souging in the hottest of early autumn winds, fat mullets were jumping in the slow brown river, and the unknown people had begun to smile back at me when I unwrapped the line from my bamboo fishing pole and smiled at them. Wild buckwheat blossoms were starting to go to seed in empty meadows, and down in the roadside ditches near the Gulf red Catesby lilies were flamboyant in a sun I was sure would blaze relentlessly forever.

Good luck and good cruising!

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