

JEKYLL ISLAND GOES GREEN

Five Awesome Ecotourism Activities on the Georgia Coast

BY BRET LOVE, PHOTOS BY BRET LOVE & MARY GABBETT, COURTESY GREENGLOBALTRAVEL.COM

IT HAD BEEN 25 YEARS SINCE my last visit to Jekyll Island, and on first glance it didn't appear to have changed much. The Hampton Inn & Suites (where we stayed) was clearly new, but other than that it seemed like the same old sleepy beach town it had been when I last vacationed there. For party-hearty people that might not be such a good thing, but the island's staunch anti-development stance makes it a refreshing getaway from the hustle and bustle of the city. Best of all, Jekyll has launched numerous green initiatives that make it a wonderful vacation destination for nature-lovers. Here are a few of our favorite activities:

BIRD-WATCHING AT PINE LAKES

I personally take the Mark Twain view of golfing as "a good walk spoiled." But there's something to be said for a golf course that earns certification from Audubon International Cooperative Sanctuary Program, as the Jekyll Island Pine Lakes Golf Course has. Immediately upon our arrival, we met up with Lydia Thompson, a director of the Coastal Georgia Audubon Society and devout birding enthusiast, for what she calls a "Golf Cart Nature Tour."

Within minutes of setting out just before sunset, we'd spotted a massive osprey soaring above the lake in search of his evening meal. After trying to get a photo of the majestic bird of prey, we saw several deer sprinting across the green, their white tails bobbing comically as they pranced with graceful ease. Just around the corner, there was a small pond crowded with wood ducks, anhingas, great blue herons and snowy egrets.

We made our way to another small lake right by the 18th hole at sunset, where we saw literally hundreds of wood storks, white ibis and other large shore birds jockeying for space in the trees surrounding the cove. Their cacophonous noise (and the stench of copious bird poop) was unlike anything I'd ever experienced before, providing an amazing end to our first day on Jekyll. Call 912-635-2368 for more info.

EXPLORING THE ISLAND BY SEGWAY

Jekyll Island is primarily known for its beautiful beaches, but the island's interior also boasts well-preserved maritime forests full of deer, raccoons, nesting birds, butterflies and an occasional alligator. One of the best ways to explore the area is on a Nature Adventure via Segway PT with Jekyll Island Fun Tours.

If you've never ridden a Segway before, the first time can be a bit bizarre. After watching a safety video and strapping on our helmets, our guide, Karen Hansen, patiently taught us the basics, including how to use the balls of your feet to speed up, the heels of your feet to slow down, and the lean of your body to steer the machine. After a few minutes of awkwardness, the controls began to feel surprisingly instinctive, though leaning your body forward to accelerate sometimes felt like teetering on the precipice of a tall building.

Once we got the hang of it, we were off for a wonderful two-hour tour (cut short due to our time constraints) that felt like it ended MUCH too soon. The quiet machines made

them perfect for eco-tours, and our guide was great about pointing out intriguing flora and fauna along the way. Though surprisingly tough on your leg muscles, this is one tour I'd do again in a heartbeat. Call 912-635-9704 for reservations.

KAYAKING AT THE 4-H TIDELANDS NATURE CENTER

Operated in conjunction with the University of Georgia's College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences, Jekyll's 4-H Tidelands Nature Center offers some great hands-on marine science programs for school groups and the general public alike. There are touch tanks, nature walks and an excellent exhibit of animals native to Georgia's coast, and they also offer guided kayak tours of the Jekyll River and the surrounding tidal marshes.

We met up with Program Specialist Dawn Zenkert bright and early for our tour, which began with a brief orientation and basic paddling instructions. As we headed out into open water, she explained a bit about the ecology of the environment, from the marsh grasses and man-made oyster beds to the fiddler crabs and shore birds that call the area home. Along the way, we saw herons, egrets, wood storks, cormorants, anhingas, and plenty of diving pelicans, and Zengert said dolphins are commonly sighted (and even the occasional manatee).

It was a wonderful excursion, and again we found ourselves wishing we had more time to explore the area via kayak on our own. Call 912-635-5032 or visit www.tidelands4h.org for reservations or additional info.

LEARNING ABOUT SEA TURTLE CONSERVATION

By far the best part of our trip to Jekyll Island was getting a behind-the-scenes tour of the Georgia Sea Turtle Center, which focuses on rehabilitation, research and education. Jekyll has had an active sea turtle monitoring program since 1972, and is unique among Georgia's developed islands for its impressive level of annual turtle nesting.

The Center was opened in 2007 to address the growing issue of stranded sea turtles washing up along the state's Atlantic coast beaches. This winter's cold snap has been especially hard on turtles, and when we visited the Center was bustling with activity as Dr. Terry Norton and his staff worked doggedly to heal turtles suffering everything from severe propeller injuries to cold-induced anemia.

In addition to emergency care for sick and injured turtles, the state-of-the-art facility offers excellent opportunities for scientific research and long-term treatment. Visitors can learn about these ancient reptiles via interactive exhibits on their journey from egg to adulthood, their preferred habitats, the dangers they face and what's being done to preserve and protect them. You can observe the turtles (species including Loggerheads and the critically endangered Leatherbacks and Kemp's Ridleys) in their healing tanks, and even watch their treatments and surgeries via a window into the operating room. We grew so attached to Karma, a rescued leatherback injured during the cold snap, that we wound up joining the Center's adopt-a-turtle program on the spot! Visit www.georgiaseaturtlecenter.org or call 912-635-4444 for more info.



RIDING AROUND IN AN ELECTRIC VEHICLE

Electric vehicles may be slow in gaining acceptance on the mainland, but on Jekyll Island they're a common sight, thanks in no small part to Red Bug Motors. Red Bugs look a little like a Volkswagon Beetle had sex with a golf cart, and their vivid colors make them look like something out of a White Stripes video. But there's no denying the child-like thrill of scooting around an island in an oversized go-kart with no doors at 25mph.

There's was a brief moment of confusion as I turned the key in the ignition expecting to hear the familiar sounds of a motor revving to life (EVs are basically silent), but once we figured it out we had a blast on our weekend-long test drive, especially doing quick-turn circles in the parking lot for our photo shoot. Best of all, after a full day of driving you just plug the vehicle in overnight, FREE! At a time when gas is over \$3 a gallon, it made us wish we had a Red Bug of our own. Visit www.redbugmotors.com or call 912-635-9730 for rental info.