

The Suburban

magazine

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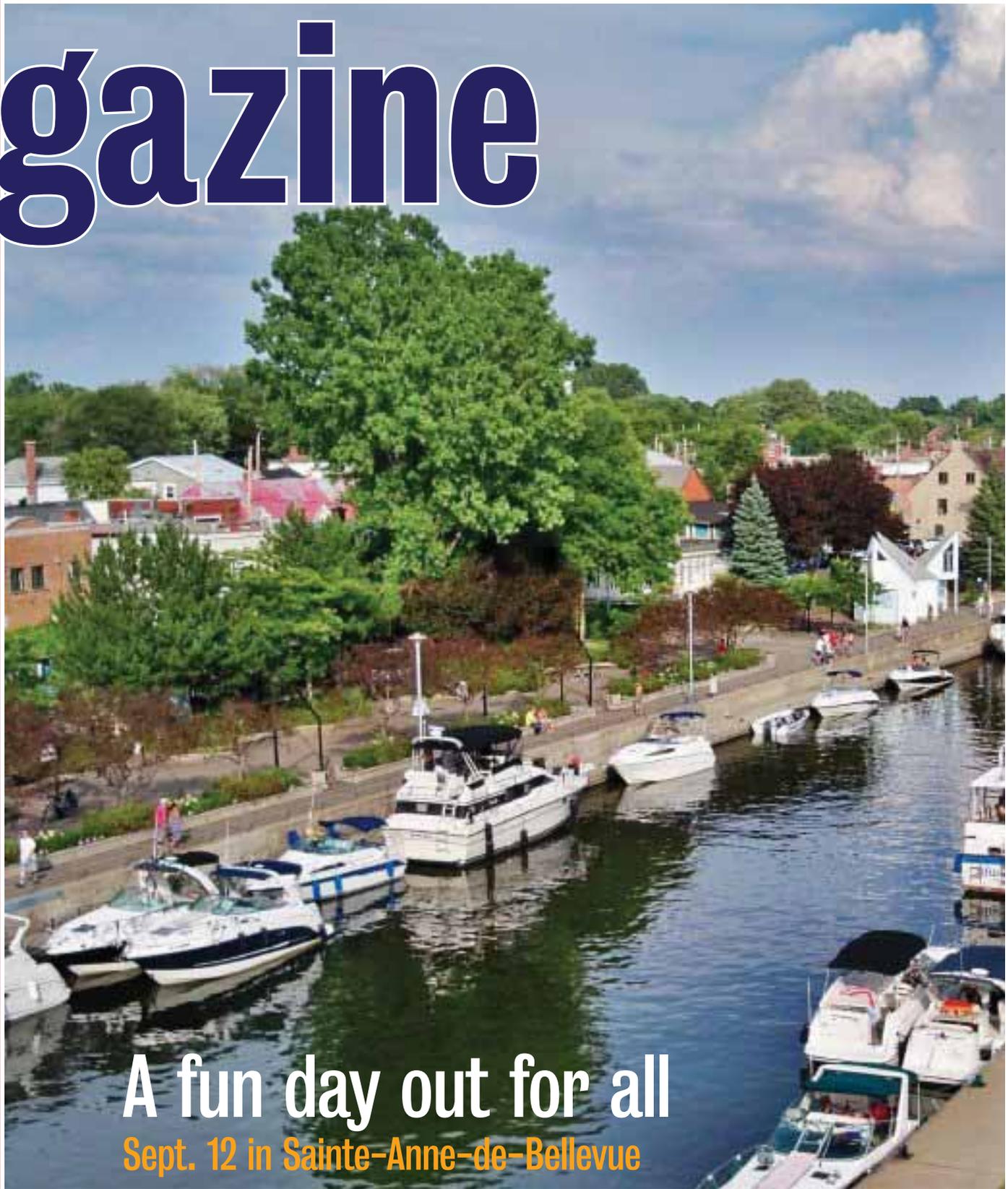
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Vacation paradise Myrtle Beach

Where to stay and some recommended activities





Myrtle Beach's number one attraction – the gorgeous coastline

By Mike Cohen
The Suburban

MYRTLE BEACH: For many years now my family I have contemplated a summer vacation in Myrtle Beach dubbed "the jewel of South Carolina." In early winter, we had a family meeting and decided that the time had come to finally experience a week in the area popularly known as the Grand Strand. I can now enthusiastically share with readers how extraordinary this place is. In fact, there was nowhere near enough time to see everything on our "to do" list. That means a return trip will be necessary.

Stretching from Little River to Pawleys Island, and comprising 12 communities along the South Carolina coast, Myrtle Beach is home to world-class golf, 60 miles of sandy beaches, exciting entertainment, family attractions and Southern hospitality. The area welcomes more than 16 million visitors a year.

I must give immediate credit to the Myrtle Beach Convention and Visitors Bureau. They go the extra mile to attract tourists. My first encounter with them was a few years back when they visited Canada and invited local journalists to come meet with them. Never before have I worked with an outfit like this which was so responsive to my needs and questions. They indeed serve as a model for how all visitors bureaus should operate.

Myrtle Beach has everything you could possibly ask for to have fun year-round, but I must say that sitting by the pool or the ocean on a hot summer day tops my list. There is an endless array of activities to enjoy.

Where to Stay

There are approximately 425 hotels and 98,600 accommodation units in the Myrtle Beach area. From elegant golf and seaside resorts, to rustic cottages, bed and breakfasts and mom-and-pop motels, the area offers accommodations for every taste and appeals to every type of traveller. There are also several campgrounds located between Myrtle Beach and the South Strand, many of which are oceanfront or just steps away from the beach. There are also a number of beach homes and condos available for rent, thereby giving vacationing families a true home away from home.

We stayed at the Island Vista a resort locally owned by the Chapman family that has been in the Grand Strand area for decades. The hotel originally on the property was called the Sea Island Inn and was torn down in 2004 and rebuilt as a luxury resort two years later with a wonderful fine dining restaurant called The Cypress Room. Many of the waiters who work at the restaurant have been here for decades, dating back to its previous incarnation. The resort, with 149 rooms, is centrally located in Myrtle Beach, but in a quieter section of the strip and is surrounded by residential homes and no other hotel towers. It has a very homey feel to it. I have never met such a polite staff, from the maintenance man to the front desk personnel.

All units are ocean front suite/condo style. We reserved a one bedroom suite with two queen beds in the separate bedroom and a nice pull down Murphy bed,

as well as a sleeper sofa, in the living room. The unit also has a full kitchen with dishes and silverware, a washer/dryer, a dining room table, three comfortable chairs, two televisions, an in room safe and an oceanfront balcony. Stephen Chapman, his wife Shelley and his sister Julia Singleton manage the property. They gave me a look at some of the larger suites – two, three and four

island as our space was just steps from the beach and looking straight ahead at the gorgeous ocean. It is best to get up a little early to secure some chairs and an umbrella. Towels are provided via a special dispenser which recognizes your room key. You can rent chairs and umbrellas right on the beach from the lifeguards.

The resort's swimming complex fea-



The pool facility right on the beach at the Island Vista is heavenly.

bedrooms- and let me just say I know what is on my "wish" list for a future trip. Suites range in size from 677 to 2,300 square feet and are highlighted by elegant traditional furnishings such as shuttered headboards, rich draperies and bed coverings, granite countertops, plush carpet and floor-to-ceiling windows offering amazing ocean views.

Parking is made simple here, with two multi-level lots. We rented a car from Alamo at the airport, which generally has the best deals, and with our GPS and some printed Google map directions we had no trouble finding our way around.

The hotel has a fitness and health centre, wireless internet and indoor and outdoor pools. We absolutely loved the pool setup. I felt like I was on a tropical

island. The resort's swimming complex features an indoor and outdoor pool area with a wide range of water amenities. Unlike any other on the Grand Strand, Island Vista's indoor pool area reflects a serene Romanesque theme accentuated by a cascading waterfall pouring into a 200 foot lazy river. The indoor area also features a large pool, a Jacuzzi and a kids' pool featuring pop jets and water games. The indoor facility opens to the outdoors during the summer months and is fully enclosed during the winter. Island Vista's two outdoor pools overlook the Atlantic Ocean and features pop jets, leaping streams of water and a splash pool. I loved being able to connect to the free Wi-Fi from the pool deck all day. It was quite a novelty and saved me a lot of money on cellular data.

"The Island Vista truly embodies low country elegance in a relaxing, family

friendly resort atmosphere," said Chapman. "The Island Vista provides guests with luxurious and spacious suites and pristine ocean views as well as a host of outstanding amenities. Island Vista is one of the finest oceanfront properties on the Grand Strand and the responses from our guests have been overwhelmingly positive."

Dedicated to preserving the style and grace of the Sea Island Inn, the Island Vista's elegant design features architecture reminiscent of Howard Mizner and his style crafted in South Florida in the 1930's. Don't want to break from your fitness routine while away? The Island Vista has you covered with a nice fitness center which overlooks the indoor heated pool area. It is open from 6 a.m. to 11 a.m. and offers stationary bikes, elliptical machine, treadmills and weight-training equipment. There is an in-house golf director here who is knowledgeable about the many courses to choose from. Special activities for children aged five to 12 take place during Easter Week and from June through August. There are even Kid's Night Out activities, which provide mom and dad with a break. Each room has a DVD player. When you check-in you are given a card to take out DVDs for free from a special machine in the lobby – yet another plus in terms of customer service.

Island Vista's gourmet restaurant, The Cypress Room, is located off the hotel's main lobby and features an array of European-infused low country dining selections including signature dishes such as pan seared pork chops with apple and cornbread stuffing, crispy fried oysters with roasted red pepper tartar sauce, bourbon creamed corn and sweet potato hash, and pecan-crusted trout, with herbed butter noisette served over Basmati rice with wild mushroom ragout. Our group shared a crab and lobster timbale appetizer and sampled the risotto with provencal veg-



A look at the magnificent Island Vista façade.



A scene from ONE The Show.

etables, roasted asparagus and red onion marmalade with lobster and the fish special of the day, a perfectly grilled Mahi Mahi. We also ordered room service on a few occasions, which enabled us to enjoy longer days at the pool.

The Cypress Room also serves a great breakfast daily from 7:30 a.m. to 10 a.m. I thoroughly enjoyed my morning order of two eggs, potatoes, toast, juice and a warm cup of coffee. There is also a full service bar providing alternate seating, as well as a selective range of the finest wines, liqueurs, domestic and international beers and specialty cocktails.

There is a large Food Lion Grocery Store just a short drive away. We stocked our fridge immediately with bottled waters and other staples.

The hotel has facilities for the disabled and is handicapped accessible. There are ramps at the front and rear entrances and the hotels has purchased its own beach accessible wheelchair. They have a lift to assist the physically handicapped to go in and out of the pool. Some rooms have walk-in showers and benches and chairs to sit on. It is important to share any special requests when making a reservation.

Some Suggested Activities

Check out the SkyWheel for what promises to be a very enjoyable eight to 10 minute flight. The recurrent hours of operation are Sunday to Saturday from 11 a.m. until 11 p.m., barring of course inclement weather or lightning. Anywhere from two to six people can fly at one time. For the VIP flight, up to four can fly. And don't worry – if there are just a few of you, no strangers will be put in with you. Each flight is your own private experience! Afterwards take a walk along the 1.2 mile-long Oceanfront Boardwalk and Promenade, check out some tasty eats and great shopping. This is tourism central!

The Myrtle Beach area boasts more than 100 championship golf courses and 30 miniature golf courses, making it a pre-

miere destination for golf enthusiasts and aficionados. There are approximately 3.4 million rounds of golf played annually in the

Myrtle Beach area. Check out Hawaiian Rumble where they host the Masters Tournament of mini golf every October. Yes there is such an event. It is owned by Bob Detwiler, who serves as the president of the Pro Mini Golf Association. They take their mini golf seriously. It is located on Highway 17 and very popular as was illustrated by the lineup when we arrived at 7:30 one evening. We appreciated the Hawaiian theme at each hole and the replica volcano, which erupted with fire every 30 minutes or so. There were quite a few Montrealers on the course that night including a large family from Montreal North right behind us.

There is nothing like a helicopter ride to truly see all of what Myrtle Beach has to offer. Ocean Front Helicopters (<http://oceanfront-helicopters.com>) provides some of the best deals and we can personally vouch for an amazing experience. Formerly known as Huffman Helicopters, every one of their tours take you along the coast for gorgeous views of beautiful, sunny beaches. They have over 40 years of experience in the aviation industry, having maintained a perfect safety record from day one. Our pilot Nick told us that on some days they make as many as 400 trips.

There may be other helicopter companies in town, but Oceanfront offers the only \$20 flight that will actually take you over the beach! "Why pay twenty bucks to look at the tops of buildings when you could be treating yourself to stunning views of beautiful coastline?" they ask. There are southbound tours that fly over estuaries and marsh land for nature lovers. There's a tour that flies north for fantastic views of the Skywheel and Boardwalk and there is even one that flies along the "Golden Mile," a stretch of coastline where million dollar mansions are

nested into the dunes.

The Inlet Tour of 15 to 20 minutes is the one we opted for. The views are simply breathtaking, such as low country marshes, untouched sand dunes and a bevy of native wild life. Bring your camera and snap some photos. Personnel will take a nice shot of your party in front of the helicopter when you land and print a four by six copy for you. The location is right by the airport, with plenty of free parking. This is a well-oiled machine. No reservations are required. Just line up for your tickets and you will be told which line number to queue at. When it is your group's turn personnel will load you on to the chopper, fasten the seatbelts and hand you headsets so you can communicate with the pilot.

The \$20 tour is considered an "Intro Flight." It is the least expensive tour offered and is intended for those who may be on the fence about flying. The short ride will get them up in the helicopter and accustomed to what it feels like, but it is also short enough that if they don't like it they will be back down on the ground quickly. They operate seven days a week, 365 days a year. During the non-summer months the company maintains a smaller staff, but as long as weather permits they do fly. For more information call (843) 946-0022.

For my family, no holiday is complete without a live show and that is exactly what we got at the Alabama Theatre (www.alabama-theatre.com). There is good reason why this is recognized as the number one entertainment venue in the area. Located at 4750 Highway 17 South next to popular Barefoot Landing, the theatre opened in 1993 and got its name directly from the country music super group Alabama whose members decided to build this state-of-the-art facility

The Alabama Theatre remains at the forefront of entertainment venues on the East Coast with Gaylord Entertainment continuing to produce their signature

ONE The Show and the South's Grandest Christmas Show. The Guest Artist Concert Series also brings in top touring acts once a week like Alabama, Vince Gill, Josh Turner, Engelbert Humperdinck, Temptations & Four Tops, Loretta Lynn and many more.

We saw ONE The Show and it was nothing less than spectacular. What a quality evening of entertainment! The presentation from a talented group of singers, dancers and musicians features everything from country, gospel, Broadway, pop and rock to plenty of hilarious family comedy. We heard songs from Michael Jackson, Frozen, Mary Poppins, the Rat Pack (Dean Martin, Frank Sinatra and Sammy Davis Jr.), Les Miserables and classics like Putting on the Ritz and Amazing Grace.

The talented entertainers, extravagant costumes and extraordinary scenery will make you feel like you are in New York or Las Vegas – at a fraction of the price! Emcee and featured vocalist Greg Rowles is quite personable and changes his suit every five minutes or so. Remember the name Ricky Mokol. This is the alter ego of stand-up comic Grant Turner. He introduces himself to the audience before the actual show begins as a stage hand and reads out a series of instructions. With a thick Southern accent, he has the crowd roaring with laughter in seconds. Throughout the evening he comes back to perform small bits and at intermission and the end of the night signs autographs in the lobby. He does perform solo occasionally. Ventriloquist Todd Oliver and his talking dog Irving, America's Got Talent semi-finalists, are also part of this year's lineup.

ONE runs from February through October six nights a week. Kids are admitted free between Memorial Day and Labour Day (two kids aged 16 and under per paid adult). A special Christmas show runs in November and December. One day each week the theatre generally presents a guest artist.

Thoroughbreds and Aspen Grille lead the pack as Myrtle culinary delights

By Mike Cohen
The Suburban

MYRTLE BEACH- As the date of our much anticipated first vacation in Myrtle Beach drew near I reached out to the Myrtle Beach Convention and Visitors Bureau (www.visitMyrtleBeach.com) for some dining suggestions.

There are approximately 1,700 full-service restaurants in the Myrtle Beach area and it's no surprise that seafood is one of the primary cuisines. Murrells Inlet is nicknamed "the seafood capital of South Carolina" and Calabash-style restaurants are popular in

the Northern Strand, as well as Carolina Coastal Cuisine. Visitors will also find a range of other cuisines to satisfy their appetites, including steak, ribs, barbecue, home-style cooking, international fare and regional specialties.

Besides the Cypress Room at the Island Vista Resort (www.islandvista.com), where we stayed, I strongly recommend two spots for unforgettable culinary experiences: Thoroughbreds Chophouse (<http://thoroughbredsrestaurant.com>) and the Aspen Grille (www.aspen-grille.com).

We liked what we heard about Thoroughbreds Chophouse at 9706 N. Kings Hwy, between Magnolia Plaza and The Galleria, in Myrtle Beach's Restaurant Row and secured a reservation before we left.

Since opening in 1988, Thoroughbreds has become widely known as one of the locals' favorite fine dining restaurants after being recognized year-after-year in the categories of most romantic and best fine-dining by the locals. General Manager David Amend and his staff pride themselves

in serving only the finest beef and ultra-fresh seafood.

The menu's course options are neatly arranged to fit with the restaurant's name, beginning with The Starting Gate. It features some salads, escargot, tuna sashimi, shrimp cocktail, colossal crab cake, duck tenderloins, fried calamari, chilled and hot seafood samplers, blackened lollipop lamb chops and sea scallop ramekin (jumbo sea scallops baked with bell peppers and scallions in a crispy golden brown cake.) The latter represented the best from of sea scallops I have ever tasted.

Next is the Clubhouse turn, French onion soup or prime rib potato and mushroom soup. The Belmont Steaks –filet mignon, different cuts of steak, prime rib or pork chops – are served with a house salad and your choice of mashed potatoes or vegetable du jour. The Chateaubriand Bouquetiere at \$76 per couple appears to be the house favorite. A slow-roasted and specially seasoned beef tenderloin, carved and flamed tableside by your server it is accompanied by creamed spinach, sautéed mushrooms, house mashed potatoes and fresh asparagus. Our server was Joshua Amend, the brother of David and quite good at what he does.

Caesar salads are prepared tableside by your server and made for two. The full list of sides includes caramelized onions, creamed spinach, burgundy sautéed mushrooms, sautéed asparagus, cold water lobster tail, shrimp scampi, crab cakes or shrimp. Seabiscuit offers the likes of tuna, breaded



The Library Room at Thoroughbreds.

and baked grouper, salmon provencal, colossal crab cakes and a bouillabaisse (fresh catch, jumbo shrimp, mussels, calamari and crab in a fennel lobster broth). Then there is the Preakness, featuring veal, chicken Dijon, calf's liver, Cuban congri, Australian rack of lamb, a 12 hour short rib and pan-seared duck breast. I opted for the latter, something not many restaurants offer. It was cooked to perfection and cut like butter.

The Home Stretch offers a terrific dessert selection: the triple crown of chocolate, grand marnier crème brûlée, apple spice cake, the Kentucky Derby pie, New York style cheesecake, key lime pie, flaming bananas foster, a wide selection of martinis and other drinks. We shared the Triple Crown and the key lime pie – both excellent choices. I must say that this was a true dining experience and a place I would strongly recommend.

Chef John Tapper takes his job very seriously and writes a blog (Pearl Onion Culinary Arts Blog) on Facebook.

The Aspen Grille (www.aspen-grille.com), located at 5101 North Kings Highway and

owned by Chef Curry Martin, is another must stop on the dining circuit. Martin says that when he decided to open his own

restaurant he knew he wanted to offer something different from the usual dining experience in Myrtle Beach - something with a sophisticated, yet simple and absolutely fresh menu and a place where people could sit and relax in a warm and comfortable environment and enjoy each other's company over a nice meal and a glass of wine. This is a place where music and conversation fill the air. Aspen Grille is the perfect place for a quiet night out for two or a lively group event. We enjoyed our dinner experience immensely.

Martin is a 1996 graduate of the Johnson & Wales University Culinary School in Charleston, South Carolina. He has worked in North Carolina, California and France. When he finally decided to open a restaurant of his own, Martin was determined to stand out from the typical dining options found in Myrtle Beach by serving dishes driven by freshness and balanced flavors, and by offering diners a sophisticated yet extremely comfortable setting and exceptional service.

Dishes here are based on traditional Southern cuisine, with Chef Martin's own personal twist. The menu changes seasonally and offers simple, but flavorful dishes with ingredients sourced from the best local suppliers. You can pair any dish with a wine



Chef Curry Martin puts the finishing touches on a dish.

from a hand-selected list to create an exceptional meal. Appetizer options include escargot, fried North Carolina oysters, local shrimp risotto, sautéed angus beef steak tips, seared yellow fin tuna, warm goat cheese crostinis, fried green tomatoes, cold water oysters or the superb pan seared jumbo lump crab cake, which was on special on the night we were there. You can select from the soup du jour or enjoy French onion and there are a variety of salads to choose from. The chef's selections include the 10 ounce bone-in duroc pork chop, the Cedar Springs domestic lamb rack, local pan seared flounder and shrimp, market fresh fish, pan roasted Ashley Farms duck breast, pan roasted Springer Mountain Farm's chicken breast, shrimp and grits, filet mignon, angus beef New York strip and ribeye, seared New Bedford sea scallops and the braised black angus short ribs. The latter three were our choices and they were each spectacular – the short ribs cutting like butter and the steak cooked to perfection.

You can add a lobster tail to your meal or a variety of sides such as Brussel sprouts, rice, creamy cheddar grits, and fresh asparagus, and house cut fries, mushroom risotto, roasted potatoes, sautéed mushrooms, seasonal vegetables, spinach and Yukon mashed potatoes. Desserts include apple crumble, mixed berry bread pudding, chocolate chip brownie sundae, vanilla bean crème brûlée, peach crumble or flourless chocolate cake. We shared the latter two and they were amazing, particularly the former.

Our server was the very charming Dee Shook. She shared with us the specials, one of which was a pan seared jumbo lump crab cake, and went over the menu selections in great detail.

Shopping

The Grand Strand shopping complexes are destinations within themselves, including more than 300 outlet stores. Visitors can stroll along boardwalk promenades on warm evenings, venture in and out of hundreds of unique specialty stores, and dine in exceptional restaurants along the way. We checked out the Tanger Outlets and were impressed with the deals available at the major brand name stops. Broadway at the Beach is the largest entertainment venue of its kind in the state, featuring unique specialty shops, exceptional dining, award-winning attractions, fabulous nightlife and relaxing accommodations, all surrounding the magnificent Lake Broadway.

Next Time Around

So what have I placed on my list for "next time?" Shopping at the Market Common and Coastal Mall. Evenings of entertainment at the Caroline Opry, Legends in Concert, the Palace Theatre, Medieval Times Dinner Theatre and the House of Blues. Stops at Brookgreen Gardens, Ripley's Aquarium, Hollywood Wax Museum, Wonder Works Indoor Amusement Park, MB Zipline Adventures, Waves water park and perhaps even some minor league professional baseball with the Chicago Cubs affiliate the Myrtle Beach Pelicans. Check all of these places out on the web.