

Los Angeles Times

Travel Picks: Top 10 Memorial Day beach destinations

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LONDON (Reuters Life!) - To celebrate the official start of summer in the United States, online travel adviser Cheapflights (www.cheapflights.com) has searched coast to coast for the top beach destinations to check out the Memorial Day weekend. Reuters has not endorsed this list:

1. Hilton Head, South Carolina

Renowned for its East Coast vibe, Hilton Head offers quintessential beach activities for couples and families alike. Spend your days biking the 100 miles of cycling trails throughout the Atlantic island -- breaking only to catch waves, soak up the sun and savor the area's fabulous restaurants. For cheap grub, head to the Sea Shack and roll up your sleeves for affordable shrimp, crab and blackened fresh fish. At night, check out The Salty Dog Caf  . A \$5 admission is required to get in the restaurant, situated on a resort plantation, but the nightly live music and souvenir T-shirt you're bound to buy make it well worth it.

2. Hermosa Beach, California

The year-round beach destination pulls out all the stops every Memorial Day weekend for Fiesta Hermosa. Hundreds of vendors set up shop along Hermosa Avenue, Pier Avenue and Pier Plaza in downtown Hermosa for three days of great food, drinks and live music. Kids can switch between amusement park rides and sand castles until 6 p.m. nightly as parents peruse local shops and the ever-popular beer garden.

3. The Gulf Coast, Mississippi

Sailboats, casinos and spectacular beaches await you on Mississippi's Gulf Coast this Memorial Day weekend. The recovering seaside region has made wonderful strides in the past few years, and is burgeoning with festivities the whole family will enjoy. Mosey over to the Gulfport Dragway for the 29th Annual Gulfport Memorial Day Blowout, a four-day event of racing, flea markets and live music. After the awards ceremony, set sail on a chartered boat and play fisherman with one of the many charter companies in the area. By night you can check out one or all of the 11 casinos for a game of roulette or swanky dinner out.

4. Nantucket, Massachusetts

For the ultimate in New England living, put your Nantucket Reds on and head to Figawi Race Weekend this Memorial Day to watch the finest sailors in the country race wondrous yachts from Cape Cod to the island of Nantucket. The preppy vacation spot, just a few hours south of Boston, offers some of the finest beaches in the nation. Simply hop a ferry, bring a good book and umbrella, and take in the intoxicating salt air for hours each day.

5. Stone Harbor, New Jersey

Join vacationing crowds of Philadelphians for fireworks and festivities this holiday weekend in Stone Harbor, New Jersey. Just two hours by car from the City of Brotherly Love, Stone Harbor is a quaint town situated between Atlantic City and Cape May. Wake up early to beat the crowds waiting in line for fluffy pancakes at Uncle Bill's Pancake House and after, stroll the strip of shops in the seaside village's downtown. After days of bike riding and body surfing, catch a proper small town parade on Sunday at noon along the town's main drag.

6. Chincoteague, Virginia

This charming hideout, renowned for its wild horses, is a regular on the country's top beach lists and simply perfect for a long weekend escape from the nation's hurried capital. Check out the Pony Center, the beach trails, or take a day trip across the channel to explore Chincoteague's uninhabited sister island, Assateague. On Sunday, head over to Robert Reed Park for the traditional Blessing of the Fleet to usher in the fishing and boating season, then make your way down to the dock for the free musical stylings of local Americana band Three Sheets.

7. Chicago, Illinois

Blend the relaxation of the beach with the thrill of the big city. Chicago's summer-long love affair with street festivals begins Memorial Day weekend, so check out the 27th annual Belmont/Sheffield Musical Festival the city's hip Lakeview neighborhood. The Memorial Day Parade kicks off downtown Saturday at noon. If your interests are more active, check out the Fleet Feet Sports Soldier Field 10 Mile run on Saturday morning, or Bike the Drive on Lakeshore Drive on Sunday morning. If that all sounds a little exhausting, just head to the popular beachfront that spans the vertical length of the city, kick back and relax.

8. Sanibel Island, Florida

To channel the wildlife lover in you, visit Sanibel Island this Memorial Day, located just west of Fort Myers on Florida's Gulf Coast. The 12-mile island offers rustic beaches, unsullied by tourists and snowbirds. Collect shells and birdwatch along the coast before heading out to sea with a local snorkeling or scuba diving company. If you've got a license, charter your own boat for an afternoon of fishing, and catch dinner – or make like common folk and head to one of the many locally owned island eateries. To preserve its charm and authenticity, the island restricts chain restaurants and shops.

9. Waimea Bay, Hawaii

Situated on Oahu's North Shore, Waimea Bay is home to some of the gnarliest waves in the whole Pacific. But by Memorial Day weekend, those swells chill out a bit, paving way for a serene summer spot for swimming and frolicking. Jump off cliffs as high as 18 feet if you've got the courage, or simply admire the turquoise seas and magnificent horizon. You won't find hot dogs and fireworks at Waimea Bay this holiday weekend, so go only if dazzling sunsets and natural wonders spark your interest.

10. Del Mar, California

Before you partake in San Diego's boatload of holiday weekend activities, visit Del Mar, a spectacular beach just 30 minutes north of the city. Paddle board the day away, and then give your arms a rest by strolling along the white-sand beaches of California's coastline. Once you've basked in the sunlight long enough, U-turn back to the city for parties and restaurant specials in the Gaslamp Quarter, a bustling district in downtown San Diego.

(Editing by Paul Casciato)