

Travel Journal: Food Lovers' Festivals

By Stephanie Woodard

Foodies young and old will love these affordable trips -- get your appetite ready and take the whole family along.

A Food Lover's Festival in Georgia

For a real taste of Southern hospitality head down to Jekyll Island from September 19 to 21 for the annual Shrimp & Grits: The Wild Georgia Shrimp Festival. During the three-day celebration you'll have plenty of opportunities to taste wild Georgia shrimp, which are caught in the waters surrounding the island and, according to the locals, have a sweeter taste than shrimp from anywhere else.



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The shrimp-and-grits cooking competition is the main event, so be sure to check it out. The 10 competitors, chosen from online applications submitted months prior to the event, are split into two divisions: amateurs, who have less than two years' experience as working chefs, and professionals. Both groups battle it out to create the tastiest dish using -- you guessed it -- shrimp and grits. In past years contestants have produced imaginative dishes, such as sushi (shrimp rolled in grit "rice"), as well as traditional ones, such as shrimp and grits with cheese. To participate in a taste test of these dishes sign up for the Consumer Choice Panel for a \$25 fee. The winner is announced at the end of each day's competition by the demanding celebrity judges, including Uncle Bubba, aka Earl Hiers (who also happens to be Paula Deen's brother), owner of Uncle Bubba's Oyster House, in Savannah. Other vendors will be selling shrimp and grits, so even if you're not a member of the panel, you'll still have lots of opportunities to get a taste of the signature dish.

For plenty of messy but delicious fun, join the shrimp-eating contest. In both the adults' and kids' divisions the goal is simple: You have two minutes to peel and eat more shrimp than anyone else. Come hungry: Last year's winner plowed through 11 1/2 pounds! The winner receives a prize package including passes to other island activities and free golf and bicycle rentals. Local country musicians and rock bands play all weekend at the main stage, and art is displayed and auctioned off at the festival's gift booth. Kids will enjoy the Fun Zone, which features games and activities such as rock climbing and sand art (www.jekyllisland.com/shrimppandgrits; admission is free, but there's a \$3 parking fee).

For some fun away from the festival, hop aboard the 49-passenger shrimp boat Lady Jane, where you can try your hand at catching shrimp. After you've cast and hauled in your nets, take part in the on-board shrimp boil -- this seafood is as fresh as it gets. Families tend to take these short cruises during the daytime, while couples opt for the romantic sunset cruise (www.credlesadventures.com; \$39.95 each for ages 6 and

older, \$25 each for children under 6).

Another on-the-water option is a dolphin tour, where you'll comb the waters trying to catch these friendly mammals at play (*www.goldenislesfun.com or 912-635-3152; \$24 for adults, \$12 for children*).

Be sure to take some time to explore the island as well. Thanks to its isolation (Jekyll is only accessible via a causeway that originates near Brunswick, Georgia), it has remained relatively undeveloped, so you'll find little towns, mom-and-pop restaurants, and serene stretches of white-sand beaches along its seven miles (*www.jekyllisland.com*).

If you're staying the weekend, consider the Jekyll Island Club Hotel, which is next to the festival grounds (*www.jekyllclub.com or 912-635-2600; rates start at \$120 per night*).