

Exploring Georgia's Coast at the UGA Marine Education Center & Aquarium

A JacknDiane.net Savannah Travel Story

Skidaway Island • Savannah, Georgia

A Different Side of Savannah on Skidaway Island

During our stay on Skidaway Island for the Airstream rally, we had the opportunity to visit the UGA Marine Education Center and Aquarium, part of the University of Georgia's Marine Extension and Georgia Sea Grant program.

We were fortunate enough to be given a tour, and what we discovered was much more than a small aquarium. This is a working marine education and research facility where visitors can learn about the animals, waterways, salt marshes, and ecosystems that make Georgia's coast so unique.

After spending much of our Savannah trip exploring historic homes, beautiful squares, museums, and the streets of the Historic District, this visit gave us an entirely different perspective on the area. It was time to learn about the natural side of coastal Georgia.

Georgia's First Saltwater Aquarium

Located on the north end of Skidaway Island along the Skidaway River, the Marine Education Center is home to Georgia's first saltwater aquarium.

The center has been introducing people to Georgia's coastal environment since the early 1970s. Unlike a large commercial aquarium filled with animals from around the world, this facility concentrates on something much closer to home—the marine life found along the Georgia coast.

The aquarium contains 16 exhibit tanks with more than 100 marine animals. As you move through the exhibits, you essentially travel through different coastal habitats, from offshore reefs toward the tidal creeks and estuaries closer to shore. That local focus made the experience particularly interesting.

Meeting the Residents

Throughout the aquarium we were introduced to some of the animals that inhabit Georgia's coastal waters. Depending on the exhibits, visitors may encounter loggerhead sea turtles, stingrays, horseshoe crabs, striped mullet, pompano, sportfish, longnose gar, seahorses, pufferfish, and even invasive species such as lionfish.

One of the most interesting areas is the touch tank. Here, visitors can get a close-up look at marine invertebrates such as whelks and crabs. Instead of simply looking through the glass, the experience becomes much more hands-on.

Having someone guide us through the facility made a difference. We weren't just looking at fish in tanks. We were learning why these animals live where they do, how they fit into the coastal ecosystem, and how closely their lives are connected to the marshes and tidal waters surrounding Savannah.

The Salt Marsh Is Part of the Aquarium

One of the best things about this facility is that the experience doesn't stop when you walk outside. The aquarium sits beside the Skidaway River and an expansive Georgia salt marsh.

After spending several days on Skidaway Island, we had certainly seen the marshes. They are everywhere. But learning more about them gave us a greater appreciation for what we had been looking at throughout our stay.

Georgia's salt marshes are incredibly productive ecosystems. The tidal creeks and marshes provide habitat and nursery areas for countless species while forming an important connection between the land, rivers, estuaries, barrier islands, and Atlantic Ocean.

Suddenly, the marsh wasn't simply part of the scenery. It was part of the story.

Taking the Classroom Outside

The University of Georgia describes its approach here as hands-on marine education, and that becomes obvious when you see the campus. Students don't spend all of their time sitting in classrooms.

Educational programs can take them into the salt marsh, onto boats, along nature trails, and into laboratories. Students may study plankton under microscopes, explore coastal habitats, participate in research cruises, and learn about marine animals firsthand.

The facility includes teaching laboratories, an auditorium, an art lab, and facilities that allow educational groups to stay on campus.

Sitting at the dock is another important part of the program—the R/V Sea Dawg. This research vessel is used for education, outreach, and research in Georgia's inshore waters and offshore areas. Students can actually leave the classroom and head onto the water to experience marine science where it happens.

That makes this much more than an aquarium. It's a classroom with the Georgia coast as its laboratory.

Exploring Beyond the Aquarium

Visitors can also explore the grounds surrounding the facility. The Jay Wolf Nature Trail includes roughly 1.5 miles of trails through maritime forest and salt-marsh habitats. An accessible boardwalk provides views across the marsh and Skidaway River.

There is also a learning garden and a beautiful picnic area beneath the live oaks overlooking the river. It's easy to imagine spending some additional time here after visiting the aquarium—walking the trail, watching the marsh, looking for wildlife, or simply sitting beneath the live oaks enjoying the view.

And apparently you should keep an eye on the river. The aquarium doesn't house dolphins, but UGA says visitors sometimes spot dolphins swimming in the Skidaway River behind the facility.

More Research Happening Next Door

Another interesting part of our visit was realizing how much marine research takes place on this part of Skidaway Island. The aquarium is part of a larger marine-science community.

Nearby is UGA's Shellfish Research Laboratory, which houses Georgia's first oyster hatchery. Researchers there work on shellfish aquaculture as well as oyster restoration along the Georgia coast.

The larger Skidaway marine science campus brings together researchers, educators, students, laboratories, boats, and organizations studying the coastal and ocean environment. It isn't something you necessarily expect to find tucked away at the end of a road beneath the live oaks on Skidaway Island.

More Than We Expected

That's probably the best way to describe our visit: it was more than we expected.

We went to see an aquarium and ended up learning much more about the Georgia coast. Our tour helped connect many of the things we had been seeing during our stay—the marshes, tidal creeks, rivers, wildlife, and barrier islands. Instead of viewing them as individual pieces of scenery, we began seeing how they all work together as one enormous coastal ecosystem.

That's one of the things we enjoy most about traveling. Sometimes the places that stay with you aren't necessarily the biggest attractions or the places everyone tells you that you have to see. Sometimes it's a smaller place where someone takes the time to explain what you're looking at.

The UGA Marine Education Center and Aquarium was one of those places.

Another Great Savannah Experience

Our Savannah trip had already given us a wonderful mix of experiences. We walked Savannah's historic streets and squares. We toured historic homes. We learned about the people who shaped the city. We explored Bonaventure Cemetery. We rode through Savannah on a trolley and heard stories about the city's long and complicated history.

But our visit to the UGA Marine Education Center and Aquarium showed us another side of Savannah entirely. This was the Savannah of salt marshes, tidal rivers, maritime forests, oysters, sea turtles, and marine research.

And because we were staying on Skidaway Island with our Airstream, it felt especially appropriate to spend some time learning about the environment surrounding our campground.

Savannah may be famous for its historic district, architecture, squares, and Spanish moss, but there's another fascinating world just beyond downtown. You simply have to follow the road toward the coast. And we're glad we did.

Visitor Information

Location	30 Ocean Science Circle, Savannah, GA 31411
Organization	UGA Marine Extension and Georgia Sea Grant
Highlights	Saltwater aquarium, touch tank, Skidaway River, salt marsh, nature trail, marine education and research
Website	gacoast.uga.edu/aquarium/