

## Barrier Island EcoTours

As a tourist destination, Charleston is best known for its historical beauty: horse-drawn buggies on cobblestone streets, Rainbow Row and delicate-looking wrought iron lacing that's survived earthquakes, hurricanes and the Civil War. But Shane Ziegler, founder and owner of Barrier Island EcoTours in the Isle of Palms, has built a business around a very different kind of beauty unique to the Charleston area: The untouched wild of the barrier islands scattered around the coast.

Originally from Atlanta, Shane's love of the South Carolina Lowcountry developed early. He grew up spending his summers fishing and crabbing on the South Carolina coast before his family moved to the Isle of Palms when he was 13.

For awhile after college, Shane worked in the South Carolina state parks system, including a stint as an assistant naturalist at Hunting Island. Although he enjoyed his job, he saw no future in the parks system.

One night, Shane and two friends met on Caper's Island, a barrier island near the Isle of Palms, to hang out and roast oysters.

"We got to talking," Shane said. "There's lots of tourism. But no one sees what we thought was the best part of Charleston."

And so with not much more than his park naturalist background and a six-passenger boat, Shane decided to start Barrier Island EcoTours part-time in 1997 with a college friend.

"I've always been a little bit of an entrepreneur," Shane said. And, "I always thought I'd be doing something on the water."

Shane began interviewing people to gauge the interest level in his ecotourism venture. When it turned out enthusiasm was high, Shane bought a 40-passenger boat, and Barrier Island EcoTours took off, becoming a full-time business. The company now has four boats and 11 employees, including naturalists and marine biologists, and its schedule is booked daily from March to May with visiting schools.

Barrier Island EcoTours offers a variety of trips, most involving Capers Island State Heritage Preserve, one of the few remaining undeveloped barrier islands. Activities include dolphin watches, kayaking, creek fishing, sunset cruises and crabbing clinics. And the company even offers its own Lowcountry catering for special events.

In 2003, the company received an SBA-guaranteed loan for \$50,000, which it used to buy a 16-passenger Carolina skiff with custom-built kayak racks. The new boat gave the tours "a lot more flexibility," said Shane. In addition to the skiff, Barrier Island EcoTours also uses the 40-passenger pontoon and the 6-passenger fishing boar, as well as a small fleet of kayaks.

Not only is Barrier Island EcoTours both a thriving small business and a noble venture introducing people to the beauty of a rare area of untouched Lowcountry, it's also apparently a pretty decent matchmaking place: Shane met his wife Morgan through his company, and they've run the business together for the past two years.



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