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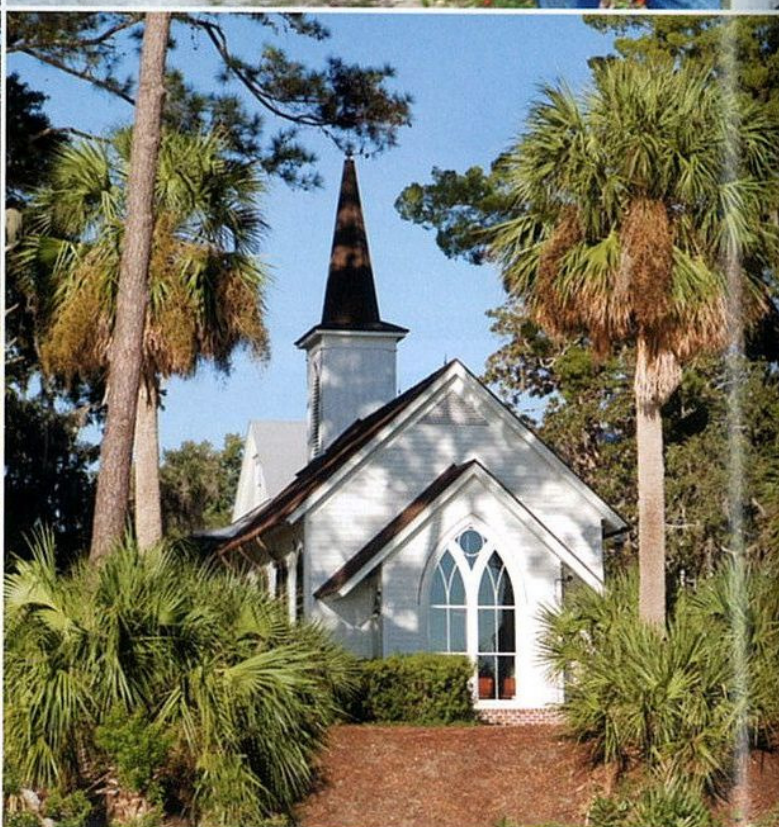
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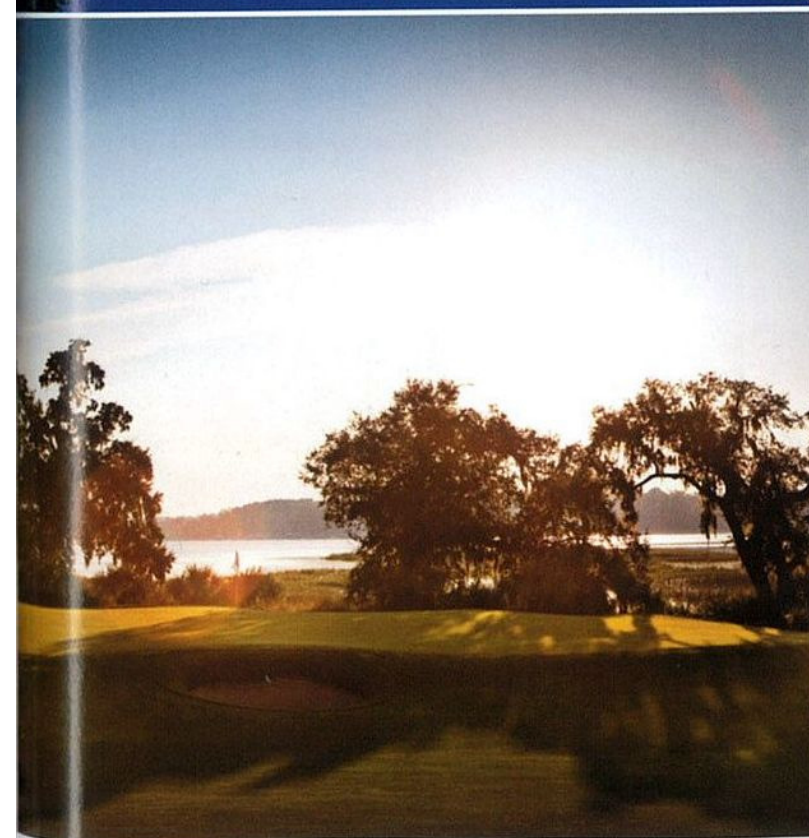
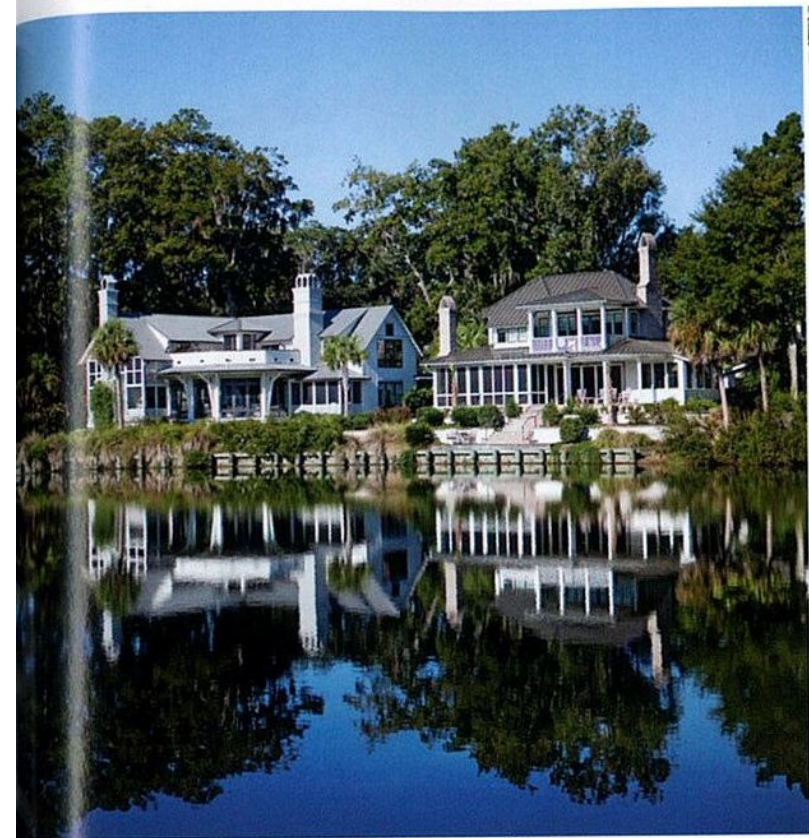
ON THE USA'S SOUTH-EAST COAST BETWEEN SAVANNAH AND CHARLESTON, **ROBIN BLACK** DISCOVERS THE IDYLIC



Top row, from left: Wilson Village in Palmetto Bluff; a potter on Daufuskie Island; cottages, and one of the cottage gardens, at The Inn at Palmetto Bluff.

DEEP SOUTH

RESORT OF PALMETTO BLUFF, QUAIN T LITTLE ISLANDS AND A MAGICAL BEACH OUT TO SEA. PHOTOGRAPHS BY **SQUIRE FOX**



Bottom row, from left: jetty on the May River, a chapel, the 10th hole on the golf course designed by Jack Nicklaus, and golf caddies, all at Palmetto



The boathouse,
Palmetto Bluff



THE INN AT PALMETTO BLUFF sprawls along the banks of the May River, in the Low Country of South Carolina, a landscape characterised by palm trees, evergreen oaks draped in Spanish moss and marshland carpeted with grasses of a startling, vibrant green. Palmetto Bluff itself, of which the Inn is just one feature, is a 20,000-acre land development that will ultimately include some 2,500 luxury properties and several planned villages. Lest that sound like anything close to overcrowding, 20,000 acres is more than 30 square miles, or nearly three-quarters the size of Paris. There's plenty of room to breathe.

With its many cottages, its pools and restaurants, the Inn resides in the one completed village, a place called Wilson. Despite having its own post office and therefore being in some sense a real place, Wilson looks like a movie set. It is a town so pristine and so evidently planned that it seems far too perfect for anything as profoundly imperfect as unscripted human life. That's the first impression one gets from the matched white storefronts and the hygienic brick walkways, the idyllic chapel by the river set beside raked bocce courts, the uniformly manicured lawns.

But then hidden in plain sight on the village green is something that changes one's view as surely as the shake of a kaleidoscope: the charred vestiges of the 72-room house that the original Mr Wilson built in 1912, which then burned to the ground in 1927. Stained still with soot, these remains lie like a cautionary monument to the kind of folly that might inspire a man to build 72 rooms around himself. And their impact goes beyond their history. So massive are the pillars and other fragments that remain, so fantastical the scale of this ruin, that the sight makes the modest buildings of Wilson Village, absurdly perfect though they may be, seem suddenly welcoming, manageable, exactly right for human occupation.

Arguably, it is the job of a luxury resort to seduce you into a worry-free, unreal reality for a time. For my husband and me, that process began on the afternoon of our arrival when first one valet relieved us of our car then another directed us to the golf cart that, along with a pair of supplied bicycles, would be our 'wheels' for our stay. This is a feature of responsible luxury, the inn's much touted philosophy, which is incorporated into the design of the property. The picturesque brick walkways that curve around and through the buildings and lawns bulge at strategic points with discreet parking spaces for the carts and each of the guest cottages is similarly equipped with what amounts to a teeny-tiny driveway. As we rode in our cart the first time, rolling over the wood bridge that spans the meeting point of the alligator-filled lagoon and the dolphin-filled river, the only sound to be heard was the splash of one creature or the other from somewhere just out of view.

Our cottage was the Inn's smallest available option and still one of the most spacious hotel rooms I have ever occupied. It included a bedroom, dressing room, vast bathroom and a veranda overlooking the May River. Every piece of furniture, every pillow, every sheet is of the highest quality, but none called any particular attention to itself. The bathroom, with its spare white

walls and fixtures, pale grey marble counters, and claw-foot tub (as well as a steam shower) is both state-of-the-art and a little old fashioned, charming in a way I don't always associate with 21st-century indulgence. If one were seeking a holiday involving nothing more than sitting in a lovely space for a few days, watching a river flow by, a cottage at Palmetto Bluff would be an excellent choice, though it would be something of a waste given the fact that between kayaking, golf, tennis, swimming, biking, horseback riding and more (much more), the resort offers enough activities to keep anyone, of any age, fully occupied for any length of stay.

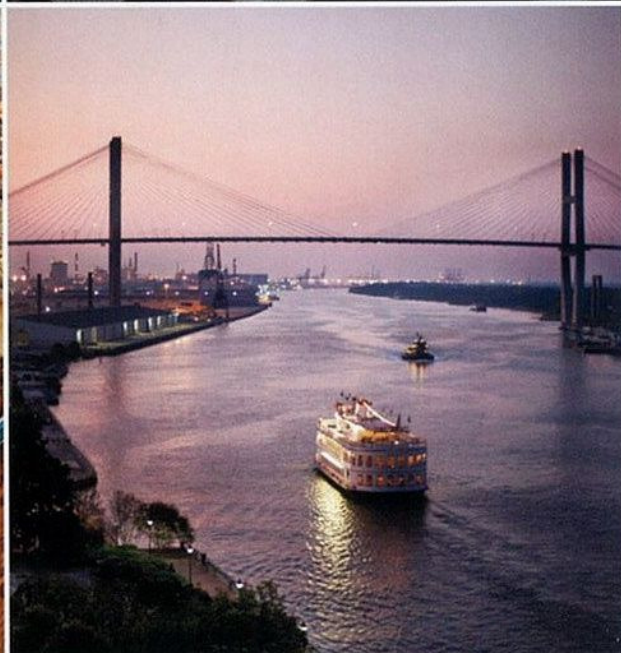
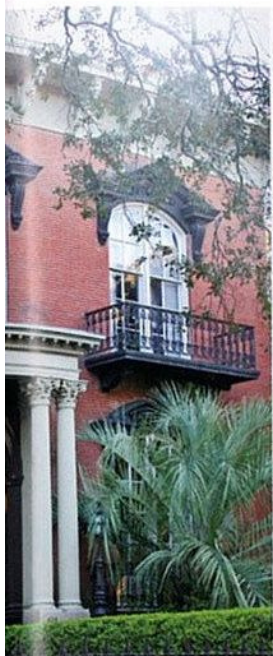
FOR OUR FOUR-DAY STAY, my husband and I were looking for a combination of the sedentary (me) and the athletic (him). Our first full day began with something between our extremes: an early morning History Tour of nearby Daufuskie Island. Two miles wide and five miles long, Daufuskie garnered widespread attention when author Pat Conroy (*The Prince of Tides*) wrote a memoir about his stint there as the local teacher in the 1960s. In that book, *The Water Is Wide*, Conroy describes an impoverished African-American community cut off from contemporary life, so lacking in educational resources that not a child in his class was able to name the president of the USA or find their own country on a map. Conroy's memoir is a chronicle of his attempts to bring his students into modern times and of the institutional, largely racist resistance with which those efforts were met.

Before we could embark on our trip, we had to wait for the morning tides to rise above the sand bars – they swing as much as 12 feet every day – but soon enough we were weaving through the marsh and then blasting across the open water of the May River. This early ride was our first immersion in the water's exquisite beauty, a beauty defined by constant change and a sense of eternity, both. The tide reveals, covers up, seems to sigh heavily through the day; the oaks loom massive, ancient with their veils of Spanish moss; the egrets look to have perched in them forever.

We were a little stunned by it all by the time we docked at Daufuskie, where we boarded yet another golf cart and set out along the dirt roads. If the town of Wilson has the feel of a never-never land then the historic section of Daufuskie Island, with its dilapidated shacks and absence of a proper grocery store, speaks of a sadder kind of never. It has never been affluent for long, never been able to pull out ahead of tragedy. The area's cotton crop, prized for its distinctive long fibres, was ravaged by boll weevils in the early 20th century. A once-healthy oyster industry was later gutted by industrial pollutants. The shacks tucked into the woods, the shuttered, defunct golf resort all give testimony to the island's bad fortune. But Daufuskie Island is also still thick with its unique

Clockwise from top left: waitress at the rooftop bar of the Bohemian Hotel Savannah Riverfront; The Mercer Williams House Museum; Bohemian rooftop bar; Talmadge Memorial Bridge across the Savannah; store in Savannah College of Art and Design; inside the Bohemian; The Inn at Palmetto Bluff pool and fire pit. Centre, a cheeseboard at River House





OLD SAVANNAH NOW



Sapphire Grill

Not far from Palmetto Bluff is Savannah, Georgia. The USA's first planned city, Savannah began in 1733, and its original grid of verdant, residential squares of pre-Civil War mansions is well preserved. Several of these mansions are now museums, among them the birthplace of **Juliette Gordon Low**, founder of the US Girl Scouts (www.juliettegordonlowbirthplace.org), and the **The Mercer Williams House Museum** (www.mercerhouse.com), ancestral home of composer and lyricist Johnny Mercer, and the setting for the book *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. The influential **Savannah College of Art and Design** (www.scad.edu) has restored nearly 100 buildings in the city, which house its studios, classrooms and public galleries, which show work by students as well as internationally renowned artists.

Savannah is also a food-loving town, rightly proud of its Southern cuisine. For lunch, stroll along Factor's Walk to **Vic's On The River** (www.vicontheriver.com). Set in a 19th-century cotton warehouse, Vic's serves delicious, inventive fare,

including biscuits that must be the best in the state. Don't miss the hand-drawn Civil War-era map there, discovered several decades after the war during building renovations. For dinner, the concierge at The Inn at Palmetto Bluff may well send you to the **Sapphire Grill** (www.sapphiregrill.com), where the adventurous (and trusting) can opt for the chef's tasting menu. Another good choice is **Noble Fare** (www.noblefare.com), in a lovely old building where owner/chef Patrick McNamara serves modern food inspired by local cuisine.

For wonderful views across the river, or for a cocktail at sunset, visit the rooftop bar of the



Vic's On The River

funky **Bohemian Hotel Savannah Riverfront** (www.bohemianhotelsavannah.com).

But most of all, come to Savannah prepared to walk through the squares, to admire the evocative architecture and to take in the culture of the Old South. Steeped in history, it makes an excellent counterbalance to the brand-new comforts of Palmetto Bluff.

ROBIN BLACK



Dorothy Kingery, who has opened Savannah's Mercer Williams House Museum, her home, to the public



culture, with distinctive architecture and current-day artisans at work. Tucked in among the shadowy woods are such sights as the House of Blue Shutters, painted in accord with local superstition to ward off evil spirits; and the starkly lovely First Union African Baptist Church. We also visited the studios of an island potter beside the alarmingly small boat in which he crossed the Atlantic several times, and a metalwork artist on whose lawn prowls a charming family of iron alligators. The tour gave us an invaluable sense of the area outside the controlled luxury of Palmetto Bluff.

UPON OUR RETURN to fantasy-land, we headed to Buffalo, a casual deli overlooking the village green, where I had a delicious homemade hot dog, and my husband ate what he swore was the best chicken salad sandwich he had ever had. We'd been similarly impressed by the far more high-end food at the elegant River House the night before. A dinnertime stand-out, my shrimp and grits with the chef's own andouille sausage did what much of the food at the Inn does best, applying new vision to the local cuisine. This is no standard hotel fare but the product of imagination and skill – and patience. Tucked below the River House is an impressive wine cellar in which alongside the bottles stands a rack of ageing homemade cheeses and curing hams. (The rarest and most valuable vintages are kept in a separate room, in which occasional tastings are held for connoisseurs.)

The other two restaurants at the resort, the low-key May River Grill overlooking the golf course and the Canoe Club, a vast, easy-going place with a surprisingly tasteful nautical theme, are of a similar high quality. The Canoe Club is the choice for families with children, and we saw plenty of them there. It's also possible to eat lounging on leather sofas in the comfortable bar adjacent to the River House, as we did one night. With all these restaurants, plus in-room dining and picnics made by the Inn, the variety of dining options was far greater than we could exhaust in four days.

Also seemingly inexhaustible was the attentive, good-willed care of the staff. During meals, or while they jumpstarted our flagging golf cart or brought us water bottles in a silver ice bucket at the adults-only pool, their smiles were unflagging. Moreover they had the rare knack of anticipating our needs (or, let's be honest, our desires – it's hard to call fluffed pillows a need) just a moment before we ourselves did.

To experience the resort's personal touch in its most indulgent form, it takes a trip to the spa where the whole idea of an outside world with things such as traffic and jobs and laundry to do seems absurd. Tucked in the pine woods, a little apart from the resort's centre, it has the feel of a lovely country house in which the occupants are concerned only with your comfort. During my afternoon visit, I drifted in an altered state of consciousness as expert and caring hands attended to some combination of my most superficial and deepest wellbeing. The spa places an emphasis on natural ingredients, generally with some tie-in to the local area, so my facial included a custom-balanced formula of flower extracts and my pedicure carried

the unlikely title of 'Signature Low Country Lemonade Pedicure'. Both were excellent.

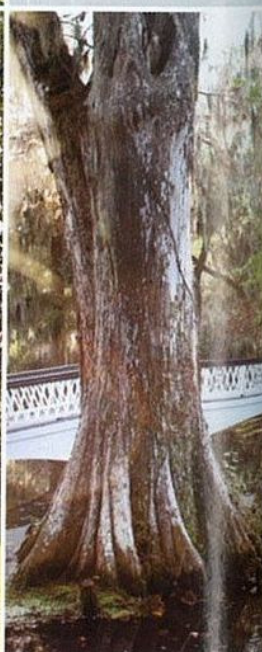
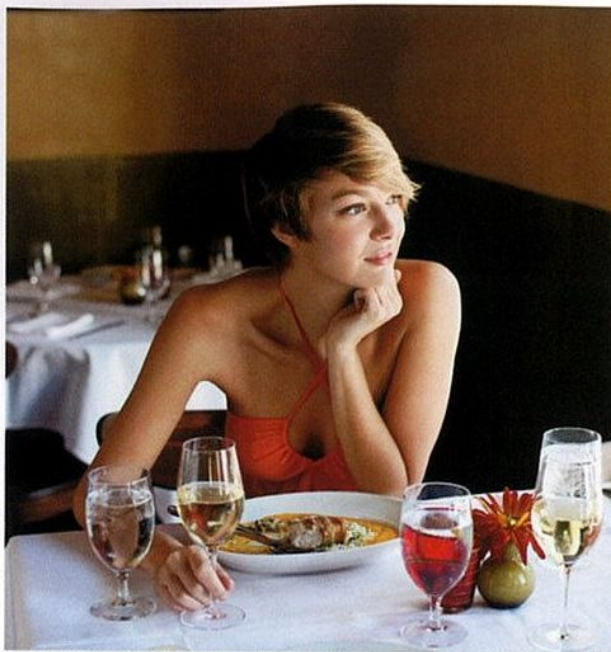
Meanwhile, my husband explored the property on a bike while ogling the impressive residences tucked here and there, swam in the cooled 'horizon' pool and worked out in the high-tech gym. Had we been staying for longer he would certainly have added kayaking to the list, and had it been less than steaming hot outside we might both have tried the Jack Nicklaus-designed golf course. And who knows, maybe in such a dream-like environment we might not even have disgraced ourselves, though that's a lot to ask, even of a fantasy.

THERE IS ONE STREAK of reality running through the Palmetto Bluff atmosphere: responsible luxury. The goal itself is obviously an admirable one, but we found it a difficult to feel engaged in a plausibly green environment when our cottage was perpetually air-conditioned, there was a fleet of Mercedes on hand for guest use and those 18 greens were being kept green somehow, whatever the measured rainfall. Indeed, my husband muttered the phrase each time we passed one of the picturesque gas streetlamps that burn 24 hours a day. On the other hand, the resort's commitment to treating its own immediate natural surroundings – maritime forests and marsh – with respect seems genuine and is supported by a team of dedicated conservationists. There are also rumours of plans to start an on-site farm so that much of the food would be sourced locally. Similarly, care has been taken to use maximally biodegradable plastic goods, water appears at meals in reusable glass carafes, and there are other such signs of raised consciousness, such as the golf carts and bicycles. As one earnest staff member put it, the attempt to balance being green with being a luxury resort is a work in progress, but at least they are making the attempt.

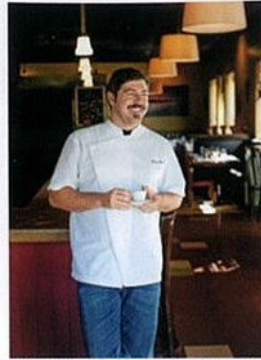
For our last evening, we had signed on for a final indulgence and along with a dozen or so other guests embarked on a sunset wine-tasting cruise on the May River, aboard *The Grace*, a finely restored teak boat with a glamorous history. Commissioned in 1913, it belonged at one time to the man in charge of the floating theatre company that inspired the musical *Show Boat*. Now, soon to enter its second century afloat, it carries an unmistakable air of refinement and romance.

The evening was perfect for such an outing, the air blessedly cool on the water. Alongside the boat, pairs of dolphins regularly appeared, like escorts sent to us from a Disney animation. We were about 15 minutes out when Captain George, a thoroughgoing sailor who seemed to have jettisoned his surname long ago, like baggage that could only slow him down, pointed to a line of 20, maybe 30 boats clustered in a long row mid-river. It was a startling sight, not only because the gathering looked as though a meeting had been called

Clockwise from top left: Fig restaurant in Charleston; a bedroom of a cottage at The Inn at Palmetto Bluff, and the exterior; Hope and Union Coffee, Charleston; roof terrace at hotel The Restoration on King, Charleston; an oriental bridge, a slave dwelling, and a swamp, all at the Magnolia Plantation & Gardens. Centre, pastries at Hope and Union Coffee



SWING BY CHARLESTON



Mike Lata, the chef at Fig

Take US Route 17 north from Palmetto Bluff to Charleston, one of North America's most beautiful cities, less than two hours' drive past rivers and marshland.

Called the Holy City since a colonial-era policy of religious tolerance attracted many faiths to this coastal peninsula, Charleston stretches out like a delicately hued patchwork quilt, needle-pierced by the spires of its historically significant churches. From the 17th century, plantation owners built second homes here to escape the punishing inland heat. Today, 40 of the city's 2,000 period homes are open to the public, including the **Nathaniel Russell House** (www.historiccharleston.org), with its free-flying three-storey staircase.

Charleston is best explored on foot. The walker is rewarded with glimpses of gardens behind exquisite ironwork gates, the deep silence of graveyards and the sudden scent of jasmine. **Michael Trouche** (www.charlestonfootprints.com) is a seventh-generation native, a knowledgeable guide whose two-hour tours bring the city's history to life.

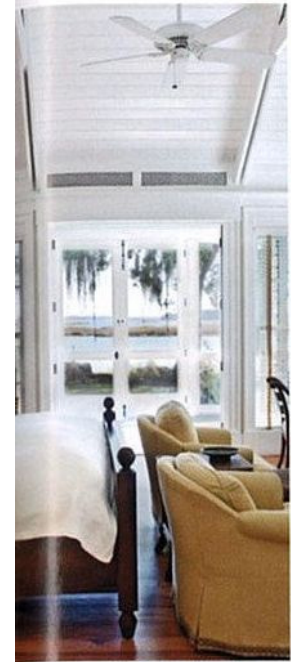
When all that legwork entitles you to a splendid

meal, Charleston will not disappoint. In recent years, a number of award-winning chefs and restaurants have reinvented Southern cuisine with artisanal ingredients and farm-to-table inspired menus. Among the most exciting are **McCrary's** (www.mccradsrestaurant.com) and **Husk** (www.huskrestaurant.com), both creations of chef Sean Brock, who won the James Beard Foundation Award in 2010 for 'Best Chef: Southeast'. Two more sure bets are **Fig** (www.eatatfig.com), where the chef won the same award in 2009, and **Trattoria Lucca** (www.luccacharleston.com).

The serious Java devotee might consider a trip to out-of-the-way **Hope and Union Coffee** (www.hopeandunioncoffee.com). If you're staying the night, consider checking into the 1886 **Wentworth Mansion** (www.wentworthmansion.com), which has Tiffany windows and an air of hushed elegance; or **The Restoration on King** (www.restorationonking.com), an apartment-style boutique hotel. Another option is the **Planters Inn** (www.plantersinn.com); it has a secluded courtyard and a great restaurant.

Beyond the city, well worth the half-hour drive, is the **Magnolia Plantation & Gardens** (www.magnoliaplantation.com). The rice plantation features 17th-century dwellings, vast gardens and a fascinating black-water cypress swamp.

MARGARET
REDHEAD CRONIN



SWING BY CHARLESTON

Charleston, South Carolina, is a city of historic charm and Southern hospitality. The city is known for its well-preserved architecture, including the iconic St. Michael's Church on Broad Street. The city is also known for its vibrant culture and scenic views of the harbor and the Atlantic Ocean. The city is a popular destination for tourists and is home to many historic landmarks and museums. The city is also known for its delicious food and drink, including the famous Charleston shrimp and grits. The city is a beautiful and historic destination that is worth a visit.



St Michael's Church on Broad Street, Charleston. Opposite, top right, guests and their 'wheels' for the week at Palmetto Bluff

away from shore, a maritime coven of sorts, but because beside the boats there were people, adults and children, walking on the water. Entire families, their bodies visible from the ankles up, their postures unremarkable, sauntered along carrying large coolers of food, of beer. It was as though in this Bible belt of the USA, this region in which on any given street you are likely to find four or five churches forming a solid fence of worship, lest a gap might allow the devil to pass through, a miracle had taken place – but a strangely casual miracle of partying water-walkers, whose hoots and boomboxes could be heard from where we stared.

‘That’s a great big sandbar out there,’ Captain George explained. ‘They’ll come out at the start of low tide and wait for the water to drop, party on the beach all night ’til the tide comes up again. Sometimes you get as many as 300 boats clustered around. People so drunk, they just pass out ’til the beach around them disappears. Only free beach around here for miles, and it’s only there half the time. But they know when to find it.’

All around me, my fellow passengers had cameras out. The scene we were viewing could hardly have been more different from the scene of which we were ourselves a part. At either end of *The Grace* sat wicker chairs for our comfort. Toward the stern, a bartender poured from an array of fine wines, chosen to complement the shrimp cocktail and fancy sandwiches waiting on platters along the side. The restroom below (too elegant for the nautical term ‘the head’) was ensconced in a suite of wood-panelled rooms, one a parlour, another graced with a bed and a dresser on which sat a well-posed top hat and cane. It looked like a stage set, befitting a craft with so theatrical a history, and much as the village of Wilson had looked like a movie set four days before. Play-acting and make-believe. Temporary realities were all around. I realised, as I stood there watching the water-walkers. In the morning, this sandbar would again have disappeared. And in the morning, we ourselves would be gone. Back into our car. Back into our real lives. Jobs. Responsibilities. It was a saddening thought.

But then a pair of dolphins appeared beside the boat, arcing in unison just feet away. And my husband stepped closer to ask if I was ready for hors d’oeuvres. And the tide of reality receded easily enough, for just a few more blissful hours.

The Inn at Palmetto Bluff, 476 Mt Pella Road, Bluffton, South Carolina, USA (00 1 843 706 6500; www.palmettobluffresort.com). Doubles from \$555

GETTING TO THE SOUTHERN STATES

KLM (www.klm.com) and **Delta** (www.delta.com) both fly from Gatwick to Savannah or Charleston, both via Atlanta.

Journey time Around nine and a half hours to Atlanta, then just over an hour to either Savannah or Charleston.

WEATHER TO GO

Winters (Nov–Feb) are mild in Georgia and the Carolinas, and by March daytime temperatures average 20°C. June, July and August can be uncomfortably hot and sticky, however.

