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Page 90

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[Weekend]

Sweet and Lowdown

To truly get a handle on day-to-day life in Bluffton, South Carolina, begin on the water. **By Drew Limsky**

After just 24 hours in the Low-County town of Bluffton, I've come to understand that time of day—meaning the tides—determines whether the spot on which I stand offers a view of landscape or seascape. Here's why: Of the 923 square miles that make up Beaufort County, where Bluffton is located, more than a third are water.

The special characteristics of this lush, low-lying marshland—which



Still river waters mirror indigenous architecture in a typically inviting Low Country landscape.

touches the May, Cooper, and New Rivers—go a long way to explain the history, habits, and scenic appeal of this unique area.

Novelist Pat Conroy, who is best known for *Prince of Tides*, wrote the book *The Water Is Wide* about his experiences as the first white teacher in an African-American school on Daufuskie Island, which is located about 10 miles south of Bluffton.

During the decades of slavery, the wide water that isolated the Gullah culture also served to preserve it. Today, speedboats allow you to hop to Daufuskie and along the various barrier islands in a matter of minutes and, in some cases, hours.

A Coast Guard-licensed captain, Patte Ranney leads boat tours for local outfitter Outside Hilton Head.

(continued on page 122)

(continued from page 121)

She is my guide for exploring the barrier islands. Ranney is strong-boned and weathered like a mid-career Jane Fonda—with the same sturdy confidence. As soon as we meet, I ask her about the dolphins.

She smiles.

“Everyone wants to see them,” she says, “and I can tell you that the folks I

take out are rarely disappointed. Of course, now that I’ve said that, they won’t show up.”

But Ranney needn’t have worried.

Less than an hour into our trip, just as soon as we head toward some shallows, the Low Country’s resident Atlantic bottlenoses stick their slick heads out of the river. Ranney starts to tell me their story. What captures

my attention most is her explanation of their rare communal behavior called strand feeding.

“A group of dolphins will swim parallel to the beach, isolating the fish with their bodies,” Ranney says. “Then they lurch up onto the beach, and they simply lie there and eat for maybe 15 or 20 seconds. After that, they just wiggle back into the water and head off.”

Fast boats are fun, but the slower pace of a kayak—another water-plying Low Country option—allows travelers to float into the marshes to see Native American archaeological sites marked by beds of oyster shells discarded centuries ago. Or you can cruise the estuaries that supply what turns up on your dinner plate, and, if you dare to get close enough, you can spy a hotel with a pair of homesteaders: alligators.

As Wendy Coulson Murray, who works at the Inn at Palmetto Bluff, explains, “In the Low Country, wherever you have fresh water, you’re going to have gators.”

She says that most visitors to the inn—one of Bluffton’s few non-chain lodgings—are not alarmed, and shouldn’t be. “Humans are not prey for alligators,” she explains, “and as long as you don’t offer them something to eat, you should never have an issue with them.”

My tour of Daufuskie Island, accessible only by boat, includes stops at the Mary Field School—built in 1933—where Pat Conroy taught, and the 125-year-old First Union African Baptist Church, where the call-and-response spiritual rhythm called “the shout” evolved to replace the sounds of then-banned drums.

Feeding the soul is one thing, but it would not be prudent, I discovered, to leave town without eating at ten-year-old Marshside Mama’s Café (open for dinner Wednesday through Saturday). Located within shouting distance of Daufuskie’s main dock, Mama’s Café specializes in a “Low

Country boil” of sausage, corn, crab legs, and shrimp.

According to locals, Daufuskie’s name either derived from the Muskogean word for the featherlike shape of the island’s sandbar or from the way Gullahs described the place—“the first key.” Whichever it is, the lost-in-time island remains an anachronistic hideout of live oaks and misty historic cemeteries, of narrow dirt roads so shaded by thick canopies of Spanish moss that I feel as if the roads are leafy tunnels.

When I note some barefoot locals, guide Ranney explains, “There are a fair amount of people in Daufuskie who have chosen to call this place home because they can enjoy a casual and undisturbed life here.”

Roger Pinckney—an author we encounter, who grew up in the area and went to Beaufort High School with Pat Conroy—is a full-time resident of Daufuskie. He tells us about his father, “a dock builder, county coroner, barge skipper, and tugboat captain” who planted the poles that connected Daufuskie’s first electrical lines in the early 1950s.

Pinckney’s *The Right Side of the River* describes the island’s environs as well at its oddballs.

“The contemporary Daufuskie characters are laid in there pretty thick,” he tells us. “The retired dope smugglers, poets, and potters—various refugees from polite society who moved here over the years.”

Back on the mainland, the historic town of Bluffton, punctuated by sagging Southern Gothic homes, boasts a high concentration of shops and art galleries—many of them filled with paintings that show the sun either rising or setting over the ubiquitous marshlands.

Lynda K. Potter, a longtime Bluffton resident who I encounter at A Guild of Bluffton Artists, on Calhoun Street, calls the town “a little step back in time” and offers the recommendation (a sound one, it

turns out) that I conclude the day at Bridge Street where it joins a road called Alljoy to form a small beach.

“The sunsets are gorgeous,” she tells me, “but you have to like pink.”

» **TripPlanner** **The Inn at Palmetto Bluff**, 843-706-6500; www.palmettobluffresort.com; rooms from \$450; accommodations at the **Hilton Garden Inn**, 843-837-8111, start at

\$119. **Marshside Mama’s Café**, 843-785-4755.

Outside Hilton Head, 800-686-6996; www.outsidehiltonhead.com. **A Guild of Bluffton**

Artists, 843-757-5590. **Pluff Mudd Gallery**,

7 Calhoun St., 843-757-5551; www.pluffmuddgallery.com.

New York-based writer **DREW LIMSKY** wrote about *Jackson Hole, Wyoming*, in the November/December 2005 issue.