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Low Country, High Style

A secluded South Carolina resort chooses natural beauty over glitz.

Pool at Palmetto Bluff



Preferred mode of transport

With a driving distance from Jacksonville of around two-and-a-half hours, Bluffton, South Carolina, is a serene spot for a weekend escape, offering plenty of rest and relaxation.

Unlike its northern and southern neighbors (Savannah and Hilton Head), Bluffton provides a calming respite from everyday city life. Spanish moss-covered oak trees take the place of neon signs and fast-food chains, and there are often as many bicycles as cars on the road.

Though it has long been known as a terrific town to visit, Bluffton cemented its status as a bonafide vacation destination with the 2004 opening of Palmetto Bluff, a mixed residential and vacation community that sits on more than 20,000 acres of classic "low" country. Once the site of a grand four-story mansion owned by New-York banker Richard T. Wilson, Jr., "The Bluff" was later home to a hunting lodge. (To this day, guests can view the hunting dog cemetery, which lies adjacent to the River House Restaurant.) The resort now employs more than 300 people, including naturalists and fitness experts, and counts conservation and sustainability among its top priorities.

Drive

Though Bluffton is not a far trek from Jacksonville, it is a bit off the beaten path. After driving I-95 North for about 130 miles, visitors may get lost on the windy road (SC 170) that leads to Old Town Bluffton. Palmetto Bluff also is located just off of SC 170 and is easy to pass by, as it lies behind an unassuming wooden sign and about a five-mile stretch of road.

Play

Golfers will not be disappointed by Palmetto Bluff's 18-hole, Jack Nicklaus-designed course, which is unusually beautiful, thanks to its natural foliage, lack of development, and glimpses of alligators and native fox-squirrel (which looks to be a hybrid of a squirrel and a raccoon with its bushy tail and mask-like face). Visitors to the area can also request a private "Owl Prowl" put on by the resort, in which guests are driven to an area inhabited by—you guessed it—owls, as well as turkeys and the occasional coyote. Professional bird-callers work their magic to attempt to draw barred, screech and great horned owls out into the open for a glimpse at

the normally reclusive creatures. The resort also has an on-site spa that offers private baths, facials and massages and grows all of its own herbs for the various treatments. Add to that its tennis courts, bocce ball, croquet and complimentary yoga lessons in its movement studio.

Eat

Bluffton has a whole host of pleasant eateries, from the casual to the downright fancy. Visitors to the Old Town area should try the Bluffton Oyster Company, where guests can shuck and feast on the briny creatures to their hearts' content. The Oyster Company sells its signature product to many area restaurants, including those located inside Palmetto Bluff. The Inn at Palmetto Bluff has four restaurants on its property and all offer low-country cuisine featuring regional ingredients. The Canoe Club is an area-favorite and serves up dishes like saltine-crustured May River oyster pie and southern Caesar salad with cornbread croutons. The ambiance isn't too bad, either—the restaurant's ceiling looks identical to an overturned canoe, and the large windows offer views of the resort's water trail.

Sleep

Seclusion and service like this comes with a price. Entry-level rooms at the inn are actually large cottages with steam showers, large porches and views of the lagoon and surrounding woods. Because of the sheer size of the resort, each cottage comes equipped with enough bicycles for all its guests, so travel to the resort's equestrian center, marina or golf course is not a problem. Those wishing to venture outside of the resort to nearby Savannah or downtown Bluffton can do so in one of the resort's fleet of Mercedes vehicles. Penthouse apartments and four-bedroom homes are also for rent, so larger groups can enjoy the resort in a more spacious setting. Cottages at Palmetto Bluff run from \$475 to \$1,100. Rental homes and penthouses start at \$1,100 and run to \$2,500. *J

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