



LOWCOUNTRY STEP OUT OF TIME AND INTO A MAGICAL STATE OF RELAXATION CALLED THE INN AT PALMETTO BLUFF. BY LIZ BUFFA **IDYLL**

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MAX KIM-BEE STYLING BY JESSICA BOSCH

PEACEFUL PLEASURES

Whether lounging by the pool, or wandering the paths and looking at the views, life at The Inn at Palmetto Bluff is calming and restorative.

THIS PAGE: BATHING SUIT, RYGY ESPRESSO, AVAILABLE AT RYGY.COM.

Arriving at The Inn at Palmetto Bluff after driving down the forested four-mile road is like happening upon an enchanted village from another time. I've never been to South Carolina before, so I'm not sure

what to expect, but after just a few short hours, it's difficult to fully remember the world outside. And why would anyone want to? The Inn has been voted the #1 resort in the Continental U.S. and Canada by *Travel + Leisure* readers, an accolade that was followed up this year with a #1 rating for the Spa. It more than lives up to its laurels.

Visitors here relax as if they have no choice. It's magical, but not accidental: the respect for the history of the area and the importance of the land were paramount from the outset and are inherent in every detail. As Patty Kennedy, the director of the Palmetto Bluff Conservancy says, "There was something so beloved about this place," that when they started planning, they put the mystique of Palmetto Bluff as the most important consideration. "Mystique first, then Jack Nicklaus Golf Course."

Like many of those who come to The Inn for a respite, my husband and I have arrived in need of a little rejuvenation. After a warm welcome we are whisked towards our cottage, one of fifty that sit along the May River and lush lagoons. The accommodations are lush: a gas fireplace, steam shower, and, best of all, a perfect screened-in porch that overlooks the river, with a day bed and comfy chairs that are begging to be flopped on. Bicycles are provided for each guest, so we take advantage and pedal to the village for a late lunch.

OLD-STYLE CHARM
From left: the main village offers shops and dining; trees arching over the road make for tempting, shaded walkways.

The Inn sits at the center of a village square that harkens back to a simpler time; but because this is an Auberge resort, there is also a casual elegance and a decidedly sophisticated twist. Take a bite of Chef Kirk Gilbert's house-made hot dog at Buffalos and you'll know what I mean: it took him a month of tweaking to get a recipe that was just right: 50/50 beef tenderloin and local pork, served on a freshly made bun with slaw and grilled onions. Coupled with some fresh fruit sangria, it's the perfect way to remind yourself that some things are better than you remembered them.

Luckily we arranged our spa treatments for our first afternoon. After exploring some meandering paths, shaded by giant oaks dripping with Spanish moss, we head for the spa. As with everything at the Inn at Palmetto Bluff, the spa is perfectly matched to its environment, set alongside a serene waterway, with the gentle calls of native birds as soundtrack. Luxurious baths sit on private verandas and pay homage to the tradition of baths on the bluffs. The Spa building looks as though it just emerged from the set of *Gone with the Wind*. In fact, says Spa Director Raye Fetzner, she often catches guests coming down the main stairway, "wrists up to their





foreheads,” channeling a little inner-Scarlett. The treatments are inspired by and drawn from the land, with intriguing ingredients like jasmine, Spanish moss and, of course, pluff mud, which boasts all sorts of mysterious healing and youth-enhancing benefits. The Spa Boggin’ is perhaps the best way to enjoy the mud: after a side-by-side exfoliation, couples can playfully apply mud to each other in a private steam bath, then get wrapped in linens and relax on the couple’s day bed. Next, you venture outside to a private balcony and submerge yourself in a sublime bath in a double-size tub, infused with Spanish Moss and citrus, where you nibble chocolate-covered strawberries and sip Champagne. All of that is finished off with 60-minute massages. “It’s the perfect way to get away from today’s world,” says Fetzner. I couldn’t agree more.

We lazily make our way back to our porch, which had been in the back of my mind all day, just in time for that most Southern of traditions: the late afternoon nap. I don’t remember the last time I fell asleep on a back porch as a warm thunderstorm rolled in, clattering on the roof and refreshing the air.

We could have just ordered dinner in, but the idea of heading off to the main veranda at the Inn and sipping a cocktail before dinner seemed too

COME REST AWHILE From left: the spa offers a bathtub on the Southern-style veranda; day beds grace every porch in the cottages; the property is surrounded by peaceful waterways.

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sweet to pass up. Chef Kirk has taken over the restaurant and given new life to a traditional Southern menu. He and his staff are having fun making cheese and sausages, and grinding their own grits. “The deep-rooted history of this particular place inspires you to do as much from scratch as possible,” Kirk notes. “We try to stay true to the region.”

Andrew, our waiter, has an almost uncanny ability to know just what we want—a crisp white wine to go with my scallops, blue cheese-stuffed olives for my husband’s martini, suggested even before we can ask. I’d been tipped off by Chef Kirk that the charcuterie was not to be missed. He’s particularly proud of these house-cured meats, which are just slightly spicy and wonderfully chewy. We enjoy the fruits of his labors, with the creamy hand-ground grits that are served with May River shrimp and house-made andouille sausage, or, my favorite, the delightful wreckfish special, an elegant “fish-and-chips” with the lightest of crisp chips, crunchy, white wreckfish, and a mini crabmeat-salad roll. And of course, dessert. I can’t resist the pecan pie,



HOW OFTEN DO YOU FIND A CHAMPIONSHIP-LEVEL 18-HOLE JACK NICKLAUS COURSE IN THE MIDDLE OF A NATURE CONSERVANCY?

with its deep, rich sweetness.

There are so many wonders at The Inn, days can be as full or as peaceful as you like. One of the lovely things about the people who work here is that they are as delighted to set up a romantic surprise as they are to leave you completely alone. Take a hike to the treehouse at Moreland Landing and you might find that your companion has arranged with a clever staffer to have a chilled bottle of Champagne waiting at the top. Snacks and beverages might just appear in the cabana after your game of croquet. Take a break at the 6th hole shelter on the golf course, and peel one of the hard-boiled eggs in the refrigerator. As Marty Wall, The Inn's manager, says, it comes from a deep-seated southern hospitality and pride.

For any golfer, a trip to the May River Golf Club is de rigueur. How often do you find a championship-level, 18-hole Jack Nicklaus course in the middle of a nature conservancy? The course was created with the same painstaking care that was

given to every other detail at the resort. As befits a course that resides next to a river, there are plenty of water hazards and bunkers to make it challenging, but fair. And, in an unusual twist for a course in the Lowcountry, this one's greens are elevated and undulating. Manager Marty Wall has a hard time pinpointing his favorite hole, "I had to stop trying; they're all so unique and beautiful." In fact, he dreams about playing the course backwards some day: "When you get to the green and look back to the tee box, it's magical to see a whole different course." Finish off at 18, a challenging par 5, and before heading to the May River Grill take a moment to admire the vista: the course's signature tree—a huge majestic oak with a palmetto palm growing within—on one side, and the water and sand on the other. Then head to the Grill for the one item that's always on the menu: a fried chicken quesadilla, with mashed potatoes and gravy.

The property is large (at more than 20,000 acres, it's bigger than Manhattan), and Savannah and Charleston are close, so it's another thoughtful touch that guests can easily arrange to use one of the silver Mercedes that are parked in front of The Inn. Just let the front desk know

FUN, LOWCOUNTRY STYLE Clockwise from top left: the famed May River Golf Course has stunning views; the rooms echo the gracious feel; porches seem to bring out the best in everyone; Chef Kirk's take on Southern food is not to be missed; The Inn provides many ways to enjoy the water, including an evening cruise on its own boat, *Grace*.

OPPOSITE: TOP RIGHT, BATHING SUIT BY RED CARTER; HAT BY RIGY.



GRACE
PALMETTO BLUFF, S



OPPOSITE PAGE: ON BICYCLE, SWIM, TOWARD REED CARTER



you're in the mood to wander and keys are handed over.

But of course we're happy to come back. We're off on a sunset Champagne cruise aboard the *Katherine*, one of the electric boats that are used for the inland waterways. Gliding along, whisper quiet, watching the birds and seeing even more of this spectacular land, we sip our Champagne and enjoy the calm. After dinner that night, we can't resist making s'mores at the fire pits set up outside The Inn (all the fixings are ready). The crackle of the fire, the laughter of children, and the stars: another moment to savor.

Our last morning, we wake early, have a delicious in-room breakfast, which includes the best pancakes we've ever had, and set off for Wilson's Landing to meet up with our kayaking tour guide, Wayne. On the water, paddling around the May River, we learn about the tidal shores, fertile oyster beds, and the wildlife, from egrets to herons. After two hours of gentle paddling, during which we spot deer and swimming blue crabs, we guide our boats to the middle of the waterway in front of Wilson's dock, and wait. It's a peaceful moment and none of us wants to disturb the quiet, but I wonder

EASY CONVERSATION From left: every spot at The Inn at Palmetto Bluff seems to invite quiet, playful talk; the town square hearkens back to an earlier time, with easy biking everywhere; an evening 's'mores-making tradition brings couples and families together at the fire pit.

FIELD OF DREAMS

As you wander the Village Square, you may notice that the office of the Palmetto Bluff Conservancy is next to the Real Estate office. That's no accident. "Let the landscape dominate," and "Retain the character of the land," are the mantras intoned by Bill Peacher, the president of the Palmetto Bluff Real Estate Company.

The other guiding principal is diversity: by allowing a diverse development, a community would arise that felt natural, not overly planned. That means real estate offerings from smaller parcels to rural homesites with an average lot size of 25 acres.

And for those who use their homes as vacation properties, certain neighborhoods have been set aside as rental areas, and Auberge Resorts manages the home rentals for guests. Since the resort amenities are open to the community, and community amenities are open to resort guests, the experience is there for all to savor. *To learn more, call 800/501-7405 or visit palmetto-bluff.com.*



why we're just sitting here, when it happens: we hear the snorts of a pod of porpoises breaking through the water around us—first one, then two, then a mother with a baby on her back. "I knew if we just waited a few minutes they'd come," says Wayne. "I'm guessing no one's in a rush to get back to the dock just yet?"

That's what it's like here: just wait. Listen. Relax. Soon enough, something magical will happen. ■
The Inn at Palmetto Bluff, 476 Mount Pelia Road, Bluffton, South Carolina. Room rates from \$475 to \$12,500. For reservations, call 866/706-6565 or 843/706-6500; palmettobluffresort.com.