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GENTEEL GEORGIA

on My Mind

I HAVE GEORGIA ON MY MIND AFTER AN UNFORGETTABLE VISIT TO THE PRIVATE BARRIER ISLAND OF SEA ISLAND.

EDITORIAL & PHOTOGRAPHY BY **CHRIS ROBINSON**

Hidden away among salt marshes and endless beaches, it's an Atlantic coastal retreat in a little-known part of Georgia that offers a haven of traditional Southern-style hospitality.

It's easy to reach from Toronto: direct flights on Air Canada to nearby Jacksonville are just two and a half hours, and another hour's drive brings you to Sea Island. Once there, your short break can turn into a lazy, laid-back stress-buster or an action-packed battery recharge. I opted for a mix of both.

It's a well-kept secret that the southeastern U.S. state of Georgia even has a coastline. But there are 160 kilometres of low, wild and often remote barrier islands

with Atlantic Ocean breakers on one side and a green maze of salt marsh channels on the other.

The only way to reach Sea Island is by crossing a causeway from the larger barrier island of St. Simons. Guests pass through a respectful checkpoint to arrive at The Cloister, Sea Island's principal accommodation. It has the feel of a graceful Southern plantation, with gardens and grounds best described as "manicured nature."

SOUTHERN CHARM

My arrival was greeted with warm and charming hospitality. Rooms at The Cloister overlook the salt marsh creek or the gardens



Georgian Room and the River Bar on the Black Banks River to the graceful Colt & Alison and the excellent Tavola—all with lovely views of the ocean, marsh or fairway. My sampling of the finest steaks, shrimp and grits, crab cakes, seafood gumbo, divine duck and sinful Southern-style desserts ensured the taste of the South was very much a part of my Sea Island experience.

NURTURE AND NATURE

The Spa at Sea Island and the fitness centre are side by side; the yin and the yang so typical of this place. Joyce enthusiastically introduced me to reformer Pilates at the fitness centre and to muscles I didn't know I had. This was followed by a cryotherapy treatment: three minutes naked in a barrel at temperatures that can range between -90 and -120 C. Amazingly, this was invigorating rather than paralyzing! To further confuse my body, I then indulged in a Southern Comfort massage. Tiffany gently wafted me off to Never-Never Land where I relived greeting the rising sun on an endless, deserted beach and my stroll around Sea Island under avenues of centennial live oaks festooned with Spanish moss.

To get even closer to nature I took a sea kayak tour with Gavin along the Black Banks River and the meandering creeks that thread through this salty ecosystem. Gavin made intuitive use of the river and tidal flows so that the kayaking felt effortless and his knowledge of the marsh birdlife was encyclopedic.

Gavin passed me on to Captain Max for a Dolphin Tour, a fast-paced ride to where the marsh creek meets the ocean. There, right on cue, a small pod of dolphins surfaced close to us, feeding unselfconsciously at the meeting of the waters. Gavin's tales of the history of Sea Island and its famous visitors added colour to the trip back.

More sedate, but just as informative, was the Wildlife and History Bike Tour I took with Hayley from PEDAL, the resort's bike

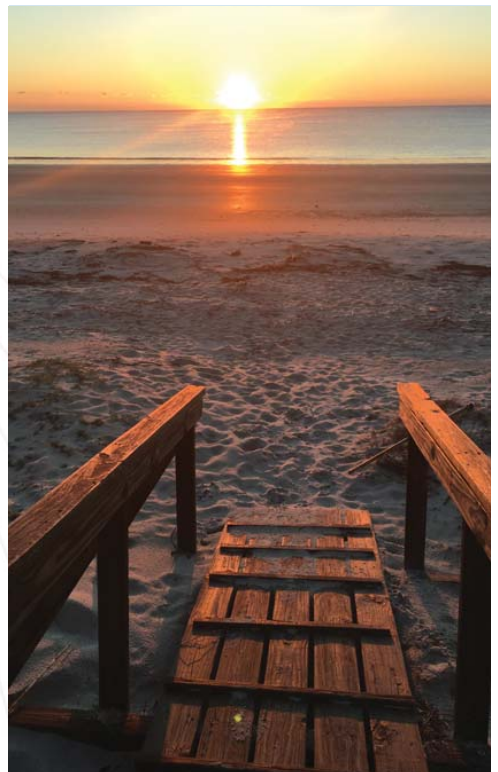
and are scattered across picturesque courtyards linked by covered walkways. My balcony was dappled with sunshine filtering through palm fronds and was a fine vantage point to watch bald eagle, osprey, peregrine falcon, pelican and countless seabirds in the marsh.

I was visiting Sea Island for a short break away from our Canadian winter, but in truth, this is a four-season resort. It is busiest during the summer months when the action moves to the Beach Club on the ocean side of the island. It mirrors the plantation style of The Cloister but also has swimming pools and expansive terraces.

Dining options range from the five-star



OPPOSITE TOP: Exterior view of *The Cloister*.
ABOVE: Book a tennis match or clinic with Sam at the impressive Cloister Tennis Center.
BELOW: Dawn on Sea Island beach.





ABOVE: Horseback riding along miles of beach on Sea Island. **BELOW:** Sea kayaking along the Black Banks River and the meandering creeks that thread through the salty ecosystem. **BOTTOM:** Elegant, world-class dining in the Georgian Room at The Cloister.



SPORTING PASSIONS

Checking in again with my more active persona, I reactivated my long dormant tennis game with Sam at the impressive Cloister Tennis Center. Once again, the expert and friendly guidance of the Sea Island team ensured that not only did I hugely improve, but I am now once more enthused about the game itself. I could equally have opted for squash, shooting, kitesurfing, falconry and fishing of all kinds.

Golf is the sport for which Sea Island is undoubtedly best known. I had dinner with Brannen Veal, director of golf at The Lodge, the home away from home for golfers at Sea Island. He described the three championship 18-hole courses, the driving range beside the ocean and the Golf Performance Center, which together have made Sea Island one of the top-five golfing destinations in the United States. The Golf Club Locker Room is a must-see: refined elegance personified. Here I met Robert “Mighty Fine” Davis whose eponymous response has been warmly delivered for the 58 years that he has been greeting the great and the good of the golfing world.

There is a natural rhythm of the seasons at Sea Island, each with its own attractions. For Canadians, it is inevitably the winter months that are the most beguiling, when the temperatures average 20 C on the island. Do as little as you like or as much as you dare but treat yourself to a break from everyday stress here on Georgia’s secret coast. As Robert Davis would say: it really is “mighty fine.” ^{DS}

shop. On fat-tired, wide handlebar “Beach Cruisers,” we cycled to the far end of the island to observe its three ecosystems: marsh, wood and beach. Each has its surprises, such as loggerhead turtle nests, which Hayley’s interpretation lovingly brought to life.

My final encounter with nature was in the company of Catfish and Caroline. Catfish was a noble white and tan horse from Rainbow Island Stables, a short walk from The Cloister. Caroline was the expert horsewoman who ensured that Catfish and I made the most of our trail ride on Sea Island beach. There is something infinitely romantic and relaxing about an early morning ride on firm sands stretching into the distance, with not another soul in sight.

TRAVEL PLANNER

Air Canada (aircanada.com) flies daily from Toronto’s Pearson International Airport to Jacksonville, Florida. Sea Island can arrange one-hour transfers from the airport.

Sea Island (seaisland.com) has three properties. The Cloister at Sea Island is the main accommodation; The Lodge at Sea Island is a smaller, exclusive option on the golf courses; and The Inn at Sea Island offers less expensive and more casual accommodation.