

March / April 2013

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## Buckhead Insider's Guide

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**TRAVEL NEAR** Buckhead's retreat, Page 24

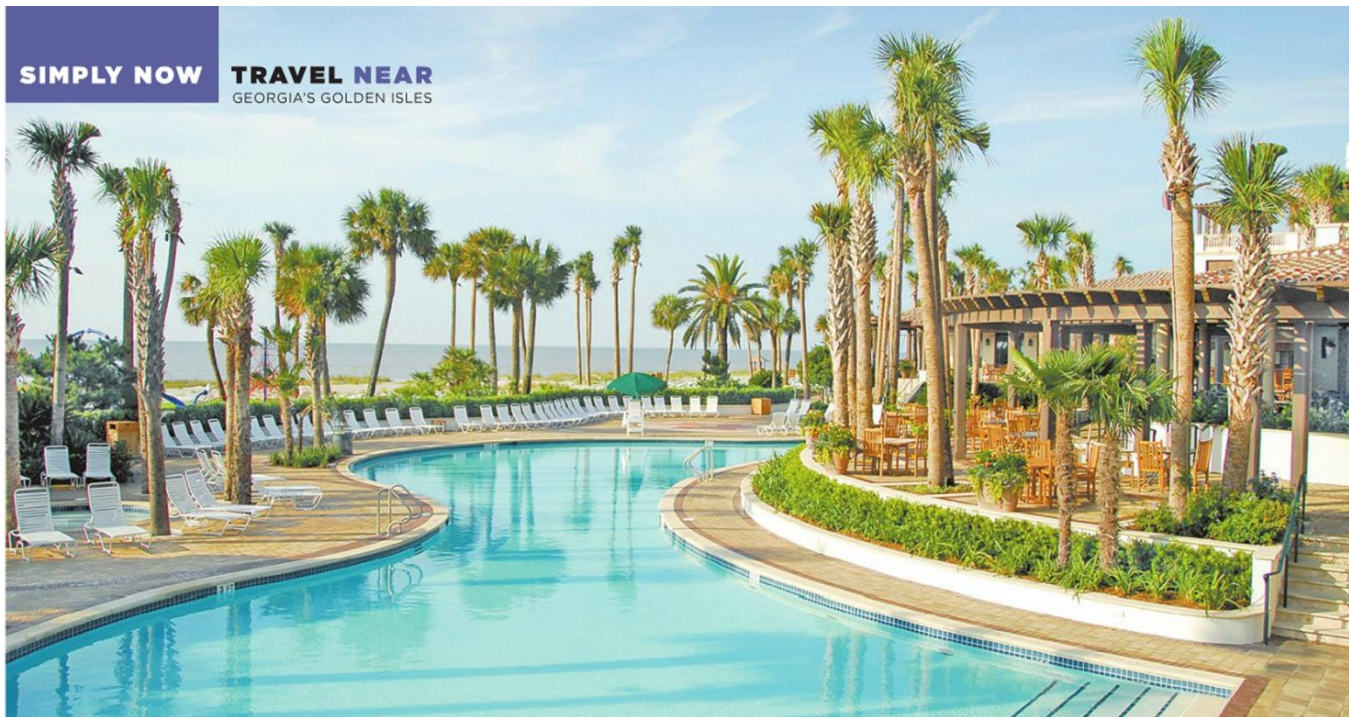
Built in 1928 and renovated in 2006, The Cloister is Sea Island's centerpiece hotel.

Photo: Courtesy of Sea Island

*"It's amusing to recall the days when I'd never heard of Sea Island; when you live in Buckhead, that's like not knowing what the Pink Pig is."*

- Allison Weiss Entrekin





The pool at The Beach Club is flanked by Southern Tide restaurant on one side and a private, five-mile beach on the other. Photo: Courtesy of Sea Island

# BUCKHEAD'S RETREAT

**Sea Island remains a captivating destination**

FEATURE: Allison Weiss Entrekin

Growing up in Central Florida, I didn't know Sea Island existed. But when I moved to Buckhead 11 years ago, Georgia's ritziest Golden Isle came up every other conversation. "We were in Sea Island this weekend." "My parents have a home in Sea Island." "We saw so-and-so in Sea Island." I've now vacationed there with my husband twice (he's a native Buckhead resident who grew up going there), attended the wedding of a friend at its Ocean Forest Club, and written several stories about Atlanta brides who held their nuptials there. It's amusing to recall the days when I'd never heard of Sea Island; when you live in Buckhead, that's like not knowing what the Pink Pig is.

Recently, my husband and I took our two young children on their first trip to Sea Island. They are 3 and 1 (not ideal ages to vacation with), and as I jammed their diapers, sippy cups and strollers into the car, I wondered whether the effort of the five-hour-plus road trip was worth it. It was the Central Floridian in me doubting; my husband, on the other hand, couldn't wait. He has great childhood memories from The Cloister, Sea Island's historic hotel. Swimming in the pool. Playing bingo and arcade games. Running around with his friends. And so—with kids and cargo in the car—we began driving southeast.

After hearing Dora the Explorer announce herself ("Hola! I'm Dora!") on our DVD player 100 times during our trip, we finally arrived at Sea Island. The guard opened the gate to this private enclave, and we pulled into The Cloister, which looks like a series of Mediterranean man-

sions shaded by mossy oaks. *Some* Sea Island regulars whose names I shall not divulge say the place lost a bit of its charm when it got a \$350 million makeover in 2006. To me, it's hard to find fault with this Old South paradise, but of course I don't have any vintage memories here.

We checked into our two-room suite, which had a small porch with panoramic views of the marshes. The sun was setting, and Dora began to fade from my mental radio. We poured ourselves a glass of wine and took the kids for a stroll. As we walked, it seemed every family we passed mirrored ours. Young boys pedaled tricycles. Little girls walked home in wet bathing suits. How had I ever come here *without* kids? It practically seemed a requirement for entry.

We had dinner at Southern Tide at The Beach Club, which allows casual attire and serves American food with a Low Country flair. Along with the East Coast oysters and roasted beet salad, the best part of our dinner was watching our 3-year-old daughter frolic on the beach playground from the comfort of our dinner table. Afterward, we had ice cream at Wonderland Sweet Shop, also at The Beach Club. As my daughter licked her strawberry cone and told me about the friend she'd made at the playground, her eyes got this dreamy look. *So this is what happened to my husband when he was a kid*, I thought. Another generation drinks the Sea Island Kool-Aid.

The next morning, I took my daughter for a mommy-and-me breakfast at the Georgian Room, a Forbes Five-Star restaurant that offers a formal full-service breakfast. The gold-plated

place settings and crystal glasses were just a *tad* fancier than a typical breakfast in the Entrekin household, and my princess-in-training was in heaven. After she ate, I took her to Camp Cloister, where she joined other children her age for a morning of supervised crafts, pool time and lunch. She didn't bother to say "bye, Mommy" as she rushed into the action.

Fine with me: I was off to the Spa at Sea Island for a Stone & Scent Concerto treatment. The 70-minute hot-stone massage/aromatherapy combo took me to that elusive place between meditation and sleep. When I left to meet my family for lunch, my eyes had that dreamy look too. *They got me.*

The rest of our trip was packed with fun, from a tennis lesson taught by none other than French Open doubles winner Murphy Jensen, to a family fishing trip through the marshes. My daughter's first catch? A bonnethead shark! We took a photo to prove it. We also played bingo at The Cloister, a longtime Sea Island tradition. This is no ordinary game night: All the men wear coats and ties and the legendary "Billy Bingo" uses insider lingo to call the numbers (for example, "couple of ducks" is 22).

But my favorite part of our trip came our last morning, when my daughter and I met naturalist Kristen Morris outside The Beach Club at 6 a.m. We rode with her on her golf cart to check on each of the 5-mile beach's sea turtle nests. It was time for many of the eggs to hatch, and Kristen's job was to make sure none of the endangered little fellas got stuck or disoriented on their march to the ocean.

The first 30 minutes or so, all the nests





**Top:** Wonderland Sweet Shop is a retro ice cream parlor and candy shop located in The Beach Club.

**Above:** The Georgian Room at The Cloister is the only Forbes Five-Star restaurant in the state.

**Right (from top to bottom):** The author's daughter shows off her first-ever catch, a bonnethead shark, with the help of her father; the author's daughter greets a baby sea turtle; the author's son kicks back in a (very) oversized chair at The Cloister.



we visited were either long-hatched or still incubating, and Kristen explained that on some mornings, there were simply no baby turtles to see. It was all right with my daughter and me—the sun was coming up, and the seagulls were a joy to watch as they dove for their breakfast.

But then something magical happened. As Kristen dug into a hatched nest, she found a baby sea turtle who had gotten stuck beneath his siblings' broken shells. Holding out her hand, she showed my daughter the squirming, palm-sized creature. I'm not sure who was more excited, my daughter or me. Together, we pet the turtle, wished him luck on his journey, then watched as Kristen placed him on the ground and he slowly waddled into the sea.

"He has a small chance of surviving to adulthood," Kristen told me quietly. "He'll encounter predators and strong currents, but if he makes it, his instincts will help him swim toward areas where he'll make a home and be safe."

My daughter and I held hands and watched him go. As I write this, something tells me that little survivor is still paddling in the ocean, making his way toward home.

Of course, we had to return home too, sand in our clothes, suntans on our faces, digital memories saved in our iPhones. For the next few weeks, I found "Sea Island" tumbling out of my mouth in countless conversations. "In Sea Island we did this." "In Sea Island, that happened." "Oh yeah, I love that about Sea Island."

I guess I'm officially a Buckhead girl now. ■

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