

A GREEN GETAWAY ON HILTON HEAD ISLAND SOUTH CAROLINA

By Lavanya Sunkara



Lighthouse in Harbour
Town



The cool seawater splashed under my feet as I peddled my bike on the hard packed sand of Hilton Head Island beach. Picnicking families dotted the landscape. Children built sand castles. Two dogs ran after a ball in the water. A boy stood in the calm waves with a fishing pole while his mother looked on. Ahead of me were miles and miles of beaches, some more occupied than others. Beautiful multimillion-dollar mansions lined the shoreline with balconies and sparkling pools. The one my friends and I were renting for the long weekend is located in the Sea Pines community, and it is a luxuriously decorated 5 bath/bedroom house with state of the art kitchen, and a pool overlooking the ocean past the grassy dunes.

Hilton Head Island is the second largest barrier island on the eastern seaboard after Long Island. The boot shaped land is located off the Atlantic Coast in South Carolina and is voted as the number one destination for vacation rentals by TripAdvisor. The island boasts 12 miles of beaches, 80 miles of bike paths, top notch golf courses, beachfront home rentals, seafood restaurants and dolphins (yes, dolphins!). The best part is the weather, which is tropical year around.

Hilton Head's eco-rich heritage sets it apart from other island destinations. When developer Charles Fraser set his eyes on the island in the '50s, he wanted to save it from being clear-cut. He bought the southern part

of the island from his father and built a bridge to the mainland. Sea Pines, a 5,000-acre community, was the first project embarked on by Fraser. He turned the sparsely populated island into a haven of expensive homes, golf courses, and tennis courts while ensuring the place kept its natural beauty. Live oak trees with overhanging Spanish moss add charm to the quaint communities. Buildings are no taller than five floors and their muted colors serve as camouflage. The Wal-Mart has a moss covered oak tree in the parking lot. Alligators inhabit the marshes and creeks. Roads have no streetlights. Stars shine above. Endangered loggerhead sea turtles and their nesting areas are zealously protected.

After a relaxing beach bike ride, we headed over to Palmetto Dunes resort for lunch at the Dunes House. The casual beachfront restaurant with its flowery tablecloths and flowering potted plants overlooking the picture perfect beach with blue umbrellas is the place to chill on a hot day. We sipped tropical rum drinks and enjoyed Peal 'n Eat local shrimp appetizers. The fish tacos are delicious and considered the best in town.

Following lunch, we headed to Harbour Town in Sea Pines, where we marveled at the marina and the famous 90-foot candy cane striped lighthouse. Charles Fraser changed the configuration of the marina to accommodate one majestic oak tree named Liberty Tree, under which he is now buried.

Every night island resident Gregg Russell entertains crowds under the tree with his musical talent, and has been doing so for 30 years. Boutique stores line the waterfront and an outdoor recreation company, H2O Sports, is popular among tourists seeking water activities from parasailing to waterskiing. I made an appointment for Stand Up Paddle boarding in the Calibogue Sound for the next morning. Some of the 200 resident dolphins pay visits and I wanted my own encounter.

We heard that the best restaurant for live music and incredible sunset views is the Skull Creek Boathouse, located on the west side of the island. When we got there, clouds loomed in the near distance. Despite the impending storm, my friends and I sat outside enjoying overcast skies. Tiki lights lined the shore and a canopy of oak branches provided covering. We sipped Boat "House" drinks until the clouds came too close for comfort. Within minutes of getting indoors, rain pounded the terrace, and winds gushed through the trees. Still, the outdoor bar was packed and patrons crowded the bar chatting and watching sports. Inside, all of us ordered an array of seafood dishes. Being a vegetarian, I was impressed with the restaurant's green menu (the fried green tomato dish is superb) and raw sushi bar. I had scrumptious vegetarian sushi made with avocado and goat cheese hummus, which I enjoyed with a fine glass of Chardonnay.

The next morning, I tried paddle boarding

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for the first time. Glen Barroncini, our instructor, gave a short lesson, put us on our boards, and glided us onto the water. After briefly sitting on my heels, I managed to stand up, with legs shaking and heart racing. Powerboats in the distance created waves that rocked the board. "The worst thing that can happen is that you fall in the water," reminded Glen. I relaxed, taking in the views of marshes and coastline, then heard a shriek from my friend. "A dolphin!" I spun around just as its fin slipped into the water. Oblivious to the oncoming wave I paddled faster towards it smiling. All of a sudden, I lost my balance and went straight into the salty water. Ten feet away from me, the same Atlantic bottlenose dolphin popped up again. Being so close to this gentle creature was magical and unforgettable.

After all that balancing on the board, I was ready for pampering. We booked a masseuse for our group from Faces Day Spa. One of the five bedrooms in the house was turned into a tranquil spa, complete with a massage table, relaxing music and floor to ceiling beach views. Within moments, I could feel my muscles relax and my mind drift off. It is

no wonder Faces Day Spa is one of the most praised spas on the Carolina coast.

Just when I thought my day couldn't get any more decadent, I was in for a real treat at One Hot Mama's restaurant. Owner and chef Orchid Paulmeier was being celebrated for her entry into the finalists on the Next Food Network Star show. Although the family-friendly restaurant is lauded for its BBQ specials, the eggplant rollatini Orchid made was heavenly. With creamy pesto sauce, cheesy layers and crunchy crust, it was unlike any other I had ever tasted.

While some of my friends headed to play golf the next morning, I craved more dolphin sightings. A two hour kayaking tour from the picturesque Shelter Cove harbor seemed like a great way to get up close with wildlife. It was low tide in the mud flats and we were told of the unlikelihood of seeing dolphins, but our guide at Outside Hilton Head company was knowledgeable and led our group through pristine tidal creeks and spartina marshes for viewing bird life. Just a few minutes on the water, I saw a blue egret, and a snowy egret searching for food in the marsh. Blue herons, white ibis and pelicans

were exotic accents to the tour.

After a delectable seafood lunch at the Black Marlin Bayside Grill, located dockside at Palmetto Bay Marina, my friends and I went back to the house for more rest and relaxation before heading back to New York. Lounging in the pool with a martini in hand and chatting with friends about all the wonderful outdoor recreation we experienced on the island, I glanced up to find a row of pelicans elegantly gliding toward the pine trees. They, like the rest of the wildlife natives, were magnificent. I felt they were beckoning me to appreciate all that is natural and wonderful. Hilton Head Island is surely the place for it.

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