

# SOUTHERN CAMP

Palmetto Bluff lets you graciously relive the best parts of summer camp—with or without the kids.

BY DINA MISHEV

I fell hard for Savannah, Georgia. Each cobblestone street—their century-old pattern of red bricks no longer so flat now—is more enchanting than the last. Because Savannah's is the largest National Historic Landmark District in the country, there are nearly endless opportunities to be enchanted, whether by streets lined with crenellated, well-kept homes, or public squares, including a couple made famous in movies (Chippewa Square is the one in *Forrest Gump*). Over these manmade charms stretch thick, impossibly gnarled branches of live oaks fuzzy with resurrection ferns and draped in Spanish moss. Only rarely have I felt such a solid sense of place. There's only one problem: Savannah isn't the purpose of my trip. I'm in the city only for two days. It's just the jumping-off point for a visit to Palmetto Bluff, among the southernmost areas in South Carolina's famous Lowcountry.

**LOWCOUNTRY LIFE**  
*In South Carolina's  
Lowcountry, life  
happens on the water.*



PHOTO: PALMETTO BLUFF SOUTH CAROLINA

**CASUAL CHARM**  
*"Downtown" Wilson is Palmetto Bluff's heart and has bocce courts, a chapel, and Buffalo's restaurant, where the breakfast menu includes a biscuit bar.*

I've never before been to Lowcountry so I have no idea what to expect, although I leave Savannah sure there is no way it can compare. Because of this prejudgment, just before I leave the city (and right after I discover Savannah College of Art and Design's ShopSCAD gallery, full of both cute and cutting-edge art and design), I come up with a plan for my four days in Palmetto Bluff: I'll drive back to Savannah each morning and spend the day exploring the city more deeply (and eating full meals at restaurants I visited on a short food tour).

But I drop that plan an hour after my arrival at Palmetto Bluff. As hard as I fell for Savannah, I fall harder here. Savannah has a palpable sense of place, but the Lowcountry and Palmetto Bluff have magic. Not once in my entire stay do I get in my car. I barely remember there's a world outside of Palmetto Bluff.

I had expected Palmetto Bluff to be beautiful, but, well, perhaps boring. It is a 20,000-acre planned community, after all, even if its planning is absolutely perfect. But here everyone rides beach cruisers everywhere—to play croquet or bocce or to the equestrian center or yoga. Men in sport coats and pressed chinos and women in casual skirts and ballet flats bike to dinner. Hammocks hang beneath wizened live oaks, some older than the United States. There are adult-sized tree houses. At night, twinkling, white lights illuminate the east side of Village Square, the heart of Palmetto Bluff's main village, Wilson. One evening biking home from dinner, I pass an older couple dancing under these lights to music only they can hear. Every evening from 7 to 9, s'mores are served around a giant outdoor fire pit a few paces from the May River. This is summer camp, graciously done for adults (although kids are welcome and there are art activities and sports for them).

THERE IS NO LANDSCAPE like the Lowcountry's. Stretching roughly from Charleston more than 100 miles south to the Savannah River, it is a wild labyrinth of rivers, islands, maritime forests, wetlands, savannas, and marshes. A bald eagle, heron, or ibis might circle overhead while a gopher turtle, or, yes, an alligator, swims below. There are orchids, cypress, sycamore, magnolia, and flowering dogwood. Here "porching" is a verb and a perfectly respectable way to spend an afternoon, provided it's done while sipping sweet tea or some other refreshing libation.

The area's magic isn't in these facts, but in how the Lowcountry inspires me to appreciate these things. I spend several happy afternoons porching, which my type-A personality could never enjoy in real life. In Palmetto Bluff I porch on the screened-in veranda overlooking a lagoon off the back of a traditional clapboard cottage. I read, write in my journal, and one afternoon, just sit and feel my skin gratefully soak up the humidity. Always I listen to a soundtrack of a cricket chorus.

I can porch because from the time I arrive at camp, er, Palmetto Bluff, until I leave, I feel I'm on hallowed ground, where I am protected and safe and where nothing bad can happen to me. I relax more deeply than I ever have in my adult life. I sleep better than I have in years. My brain slows down. Not that this was part of my plan, but every day I go all day without checking my phone or email. For whatever reason, it feels like the right thing to do. Life doesn't go away, but since the worries of it do, I porch.

I also go on a couple of sunrise runs. Some along paved trails; others on paths made of crushed oyster shells or packed sand. I pass forested nature preserves and ponds. Running home the

NATHAN HIRSHMAN



first morning, I meet a family of deer, resting just off the trail in thick beds of fallen sycamore leaves. Running my last morning, I spot a moving alligator in the middle of the lagoon. To get better photos of it I walk past a “Do not feed the alligators” sign and to the end of a pier. During the five minutes I watch the creature, never once does it look in my direction or come closer. Later, looking at the photos I took, it looks like a log.

As much as I enjoy my runs, it is my sunrise and sunset walks that I enjoy most. This is surprising because I am not a walker. Again, though, walking—slowing down—feels like the right thing to do. One evening, I walk farther than expected and arrive at a tree house on the bank of Cauley’s Creek just before sunset. I climb four stories to the highest floor and am above the top of the forest’s thick canopy. Below, anglers make their last casts of the day and an egret wades in the thick cattails at the creek’s edge. The oranges and pinks so suck me in, I forget about having to walk back. But even if I were to remember, I don’t know how I could leave the sunset early, each one while I’m here is a show worthy of watching to the very end.

I rely on Palmetto Bluff’s magic to save me from walking home by myself in the dark. And by “magic,” I mean a staff member gives me a ride home in a golf cart.

EARLY AFTERNOONS not spent reading or napping in a hammock are for tennis lessons at Wilson Lawn & Racquet, where I twice hit with tennis pro Natalie. A former college player, she quickly figures out I like low forehands with plenty of pace. Returning ball after ball low and fast, Natalie makes me feel like a tennis star. In addition to its eight Har-Tru tennis courts, the

DINA MISHEV (2)

racquet club has two croquet lawns and two bocce courts, but I never see anyone playing either.

If I were here longer, I’d go to the Palmetto Bluff Shooting Club, where 13 sporting clays stations wind through a 40-acre forest. Although it does make me a bit nervous, the shooting club welcomes “all ages and all shooting abilities.” I’d also get over my fear of horses and spend a day taking a riding lesson at Longfield Stables, Palmetto Bluff’s 173-acre farm and equestrian facility. It has always been a dream to ride a horse at a full gallop, and I do have a feeling there are few places safer than here to start my career as an equestrienne. Perhaps on my next trip.

While horses scare me, the presence of alligators in Palmetto Bluff’s ponds and rivers does not, at least when it comes to kayaking and stand-up paddleboarding. This is because of a Palmetto Bluff Conservancy brochure given to me at check-in, “A Guide to Living With Alligators.” The front flap has a photo of two gators lazily sunning themselves while a heron nonchalantly wades in the shallows behind. Having never before lived around—or even seen in the wild—an alligator, I’m glad for this guide. It states “Humans are not natural prey for alligators” and “An alligator will not intentionally approach a canoe or kayak.”

It is a SUPing adventure—no alligators involved—that keeps me from the last Savannah activity I think I might still do. The night before my departure, feeling I have soaked up enough Lowcountry magic, I make a reservation for early the next afternoon, for a historic architecture walking tour of downtown. I’ll do the tour and then head for the airport. But at the end of my sunrise walk that last morning, I swear I see “SUP” written in the reflection on the clouds on the May River. (Or maybe I’m

**GETTING AWAY**

*An hour hike or a 15-minute bike ride from the tennis courts at Wilson, Moreland has hammocks for adults and a treehouse. Climb the four stories to the top of the treehouse and you can see for miles in all directions.*

seeing what I want to see?) This cloud writing is a different kind of magic than the Ouija boards that were the rage my last time at summer camp, but still I pay attention.

Out on the May River on a rented paddleboard, I feel the tide coming in. There aren't waves, but there's a gentle push upstream and when I turn the board around and take a few paddles downstream towards Savannah, slight resistance. Not that I need the tide to confirm my decision—I have no regrets over not going back to Savannah—but I appreciate nature's affirmation nonetheless.

WHILE I NOTE THE TIDE, it doesn't really matter because my goal is not to paddle, but to porch. When Karen at the Boathouse Boutique explained porching to me my first day in Palmetto Bluff, I asked her many questions. I had not yet had the idea to sit down on a SUP in the May River, sip from a bottle of sweet tea, and watch the world float by—that only came after I saw the writing in the clouds—but still I asked Karen whether an actual porch was needed to porch. Could you porch on a pier? Could you porch in a hammock? How about a tree swing? A bench along the river? After considering my question for some seconds—this obviously wasn't something to answer flippantly—she replied that it wasn't the porch that was important, but the pace. "Porching is about slowing down and being in the moment," she said.

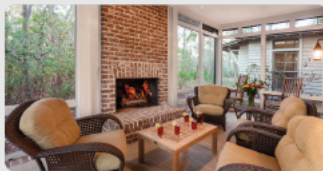
I might be a porching newbie, but straddling my board, looking back at shore to anglers getting ready to go out for the day, couples pedaling along the waterfront, and a brother and sister skipping stones from the end of a pier, I can't help but think I nailed it.

**SENSE OF PLACE**  
*Palmetto Bluff knows exactly what it is, and exactly where many of the world's major cities are in relation to it.*



**Dina Mishev** is Inspirato's Editor.

## INSPIRATO RECOMMENDS



### Palmetto Bluff

Inspirato Members can choose between two four-bedroom, four-and-a-half-bath residences that both embody Lowcountry charm, and feature sizeable porches for quality porching time.

TO LEARN MORE ABOUT OUR PALMETTO BLUFF RESIDENCES, GO TO [INSPIRATO.COM/DESTINATIONS](http://INSPIRATO.COM/DESTINATIONS).



*Gayle Steiner's picks*  
Destination Concierge

#### DELICACIES

The **Skullcreek Boathouse** on Hilton Head prepares the area's best sushi.

For dessert, order the fresh caramel cheesecake at the **Old Town Dispensary** in Bluffton. You need to order it as soon as you arrive because it sells out quickly.

Or hop a boat to Dafuskie Island for a meal at **Marshide Mama's**, which has been featured on the Food Network.

For a special night out, reserve a table at **The Bluffton Room** in historic downtown Bluffton and order the house specialties: steak, Caesar salad, and Bananas Foster for dessert.

#### DAY TRIPS

Book the Ultimate Lowcountry Day with **Outside Palmetto Bluff**. They'll take you to the May River for tubing, wakeboarding, or another water sport such as paddleboarding or kayaking. Paddling out to the **May River Sand Bar** at low tide is always a hit. Don't be surprised if some dolphins join you for the trip.

Climb aboard a **May River Excursion** with Captain Chris, who was raised on the May River. His four-hour trip can include fishing, crabbing, and shrimping.

March 12, 2017

#### PALMETTO BLUFF 1/2 MARATHON AND 10K

The fast-paced course draws runners from around the country.

November 2017

#### MUSIC TO YOUR MOUTH

Tickets to Palmetto Bluff's signature outdoor food, wine, and brews festival sell out in minutes.

December 2017

#### CHRISTMAS IN THE VILLAGE

A Palmetto Bluff tradition: join guests on the Village Green for an outdoor movie night featuring a beloved Christmas movie.

DINA MISHEV (TOP)

