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PAWLEYS ISLAND, S.C. — A Southern beach resort normally doesn't have any inviolable rules, but this is one of America's oldest beach towns. And the rule it imposes can hardly be called onerous — we must listen to the crashing of the surf from the comfort of a genuine Pawleys Island hammock.

A law-abiding citizen by nature myself, I had no problem modifying my daily schedule to accommodate traditional community values during my family's weeklong beach cottage rental.



Though Pawleys Island is well-known throughout the South — many families have been coming here for years — we Yankees had stumbled upon it by accident. We were looking for a beach vacation in the historically evocative Old South, but without shelling out the big bucks for those gated resort islands between Charleston and Savannah. Pawleys Island prides itself on being "arrogantly shabby." It turned out to be an enlightened choice, literally, as the island's strict no-high-rise edifice complex makes it possible to watch the sun rise over the green Atlantic from your front porch and then set over the brown-black tidal estuary from your back porch.

Like most of Pawleys Island's 21st-century seasonal visitors, my wife, our 3-year-old twin daughters, and my parents had come to this four-mile-long, purely residential barrier island to escape the annoying routines of work, home and school. More than 200 years earlier, the very first visitors had come to escape something fatal: malaria.

Beginning in the late 1600s, coastal South Carolina's unique blend of low-lying rivers and tidal surge prompted the cultivation of rice. By 1850, Georgetown County was producing a million pounds a year, a full half of the nation's output. With prices averaging 32 cents a pound, the small community of Georgetown had become the wealthiest city in the state and South Carolina the second-wealthiest state in the country, behind Massachusetts. The only problem was living long enough to enjoy it.

Percival Pawley was one of those early planters, and his agriculturally useless island earned a second look in the early 1700s, when it was discovered that the steady offshore breezes not only kept the malaria-carrying mosquitoes who flourished in the flooded rice fields grounded, but that the twice-daily tidal flow in the marshy channels prevented them from breeding. The first "summer houses" were built on the mainland, but beginning in the 1820s, the island itself became the place to be from May to November.

And it still is, though all that remains of those early days are 12 well-weathered clapboard cottages (one of which is now Evans Pelican Inn), plus Allston's Bank (also known as the South Causeway), built by South Carolina governor and Pawleys Island landowner Robert F. W. Allston in 1846.

We looked forward to exploring the historically rich and antebellum Georgetown County.

Our first morning initiated what would become our routine: combing the beach, cup of coffee in hand, to see what the night's high tide had washed up, then watersports in the front yard, and then watching the girls play in the sand from the comfort of our Pawleys Island hammock.

Afternoons were for outings. For the more traditionally active, that means deep-sea fishing (the Gulf Stream is only 60 miles offshore), scuba diving (a large number of wrecks) and numerous golf courses. But our mission was to absorb as much history as sun.

Brookgreen Gardens is the country's oldest and largest public sculpture garden. In 1930, Southern Pacific Railroad heir Archer Milton Huntington acquired more than 9,000 acres of abandoned rice and indigo plantations. He converted some of the land into outdoor sculpture grounds for his wife, Anna Hyatt. More than 550 (and still growing) works by more than 200 internationally recognized sculptors are displayed against a backdrop of landscaped gardens and gurgling fountains. Of more interest to the girls, however, was the Lowcountry Wildlife Park, with walk-through aviaries for observing native fauna, and an hourlong pontoon-float trip along the Waccamaw River, where they got to see their first wild alligators.

Farther south, Wall Street financier, presidential adviser and native South Carolinian Bernard Baruch bought up another 11 former plantations, including an entire slave village, in 1905 and converted them into a combination nature preserve/historical park. (Hobcaw Barony is open only in the morning and accessible only via three-hour van tours.) The next day, we visited Georgetown. A total of 63 homes in the live-oak-laden, 40-block historic district are listed on the National Register, including that of Joseph Hayne Rainey, the first African-American elected to Congress. Our formal introduction was made at the Rice Museum, housed upstairs in the 1842 Greek Revival Old Market Building. Legend has it that rice was introduced in 1685, when an impoverished ship captain, fresh in from Madagascar, paid for his repairs with a bag of seed rice. The confluence of five rivers — the Black, Pee Dee,

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[\(ENLARGE\)](#)

Firewheel (Gaillardia pulchella) stands out on the salt marsh on Pawleys Island.

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MOST POPULAR

Waccamaw, Santee and Sampit — and the tidal surge as they flow into the Atlantic at Winyah Bay made the appropriately nicknamed Lowcountry ideal for what soon became known as "Carolina Gold."

Ideal, that is, if you overlooked the 46,000 acres of thick cypress cover. Clearing it was a task equal to building the pyramids, according to the narrator of the 15-minute video. That work was all done by slaves specially "ordered" from Senegal and Gambia for their rice-cultivating expertise.

Little is left of that legacy, but on a quick detour to 900-acre Mansfield Plantation, now a bed-and-breakfast, we were able to see a row of slave cabins and an antebellum winnowing house.

To glimpse how the privileged few had lived required another day and the services of Rod Singleton and his Lowcountry Plantation Tour, a three-hour pontoon trip up the Black River, the main thoroughfare of Georgetown's golden age. As it turned out, we weren't the only ones looking for Cap'n Rod. His crew had lost track of him, too, and politely offered to refund our \$20 if he didn't show. But show he did, and he kept up a flowing commentary of historical tidbits and local myths.

Our first float-by sighting was of Whitehall Plantation, where President John Quincy Adams' minister to Mexico, Joel Poinsett, began the commercial cultivation of a bright-red-leaved plant that he had brought back and named after himself. One chimney is all that remains of the plantation house, which was burned by the Union Army in 1863.

Given the thick foliage and recessed locations, fleeting glimpses were all we got of some half-dozen other plantations, including Springfield, whose exterior was featured in the Mel Gibson film "The Patriot." Then, after pointing out some truly enormous osprey and eagle nests on the Pee Dee River, Cap'n Rod dropped rhetorical anchor on the recent obsession with gentrification and golf courses. His case in point was the 50,000-acre estate that George W. Vanderbilt had given to his niece Lucille as a wedding present in the early 1900s and that was now being subdivided into riverfront estates.

Another morning at leisure in our back yard was followed by the mandatory excursion to gawk at the commercial chaos of Myrtle Beach, and before we knew it, our week was almost up.

There was still time to pay our respects to two Pawleys Island originals. First, of course, were the Pawleys themselves, who lie buried behind wrought-iron fences in the moss-draped churchyard of All Saints Episcopal Church. Second, their hammock, which was invented by another rice planter and former riverboat captain, supposedly because he just couldn't sleep comfortably on terra firma. In a side cabin at the Original Hammock Shop on U.S. 17, two nimble-handed weavers show how it's done while a 12-minute video tells the history and extols the merits of these finely crafted wonders.

And best of all, we still had one more spring evening to enjoy them.

**IF YOU GO**

**Getting there**

• Pawleys Island lies along the Waccamaw Neck of coastal South Carolina, 25 miles south of Myrtle Beach and 70 miles north of Charleston.

**Where to stay**

- If you want to stay on Pawleys Island (as opposed to the town on the mainland of the same name), you have three choices:
  - **Sea View Inn**, a 20-room inn built in 1937. 414 Myrtle Road, Pawleys Island, SC 29585; 843-237-4253; [www.seaviewinn.net](#). Doubles \$195-\$265, includes all meals; children or others staying in the same room \$60 additional daily. Summer season (Memorial Day to Labor Day) reservations are taken by the week only (Saturday to Saturday); the rest of the year, there is a two-night minimum.
  - **Evans Pelican Inn**, an eight-room inn built in 1858. 500 Myrtle Road, Pawleys Island, SC 29585; 843-237-2298. Doubles \$170.
  - **Beach rentals**. Check with the Georgetown County Visitors Bureau or Pawleys Island Civic Association.
- If you'd like to savor the area's golden age, there are two former rice plantations on the mainland:
- **Litchfield Plantation**, a member of Small Luxury Hotels of the World. Kings River Road, P.O. Box 290, Pawleys Island, SC 29585; 1-800-869-1410; [www.litchfieldplantation.com](#). Rates vary by season. A sampling: deluxe room \$138-\$215 nightly; junior suites, \$154-\$240 nightly; packages of four nights in a two-bedroom villa from \$1,243 or four nights in a three-bedroom villa from \$1,824 (includes champagne on arrival, breakfast, daily maid service, admission to nearby health club, free tennis, daily newspaper).
  - **Mansfield Plantation Bed & Breakfast**, named one of Charleston Magazine's "10 great romantic getaways." 1776 Mansfield Road, Georgetown, SC 29440; 1-800-355-3223; [www.mansfieldplantation.com](#). Doubles \$95-\$135.

**Where to eat**

• There are no public restaurants on the island, but Georgetown County is famous for two things: seafood and Carolina barbecue (i.e., with a vinegar sauce). For the former, Murrells Inlet offers the best selection of side-by-side dining prospects, many of which have decks with inlet views. For the best all-round experience, try Captain Dave's Dockside, Hot Fish Camp or Oliver's, which dates to 1910. For barbecue, go to Hog Heaven on U.S. 17 just south of town, where the food is served on paper plates and seating is family style.

**Information**

- **Brookgreen Gardens**, U.S. 17 between Pawleys Island and Murrells Inlet, 1-800-849-1931, [www.brookgreen.org](#).
- **Hobcaw Barony**, U.S. 17, Georgetown, 843-546-4623, [www.hobcawbarony.com](#).
- **Cap'n Rod's Lowcountry Plantation Tours**, 705-B Front St., Georgetown, 843-477-0287, [www.lowcountrytours.com](#).
- **Georgetown County Visitors Bureau**, P.O. Box 2068, Pawleys Island, SC 29585, 1-866-368-8687, [www.visitgeorgetowncountysc.com](#).
- **Pawleys Island Civic Association**, P.O. Box 1818, Pawleys Island, SC 29585, 843-237-1698, [www.townofpawleysisland.com](#).

