



SOUTHERN COMFORT

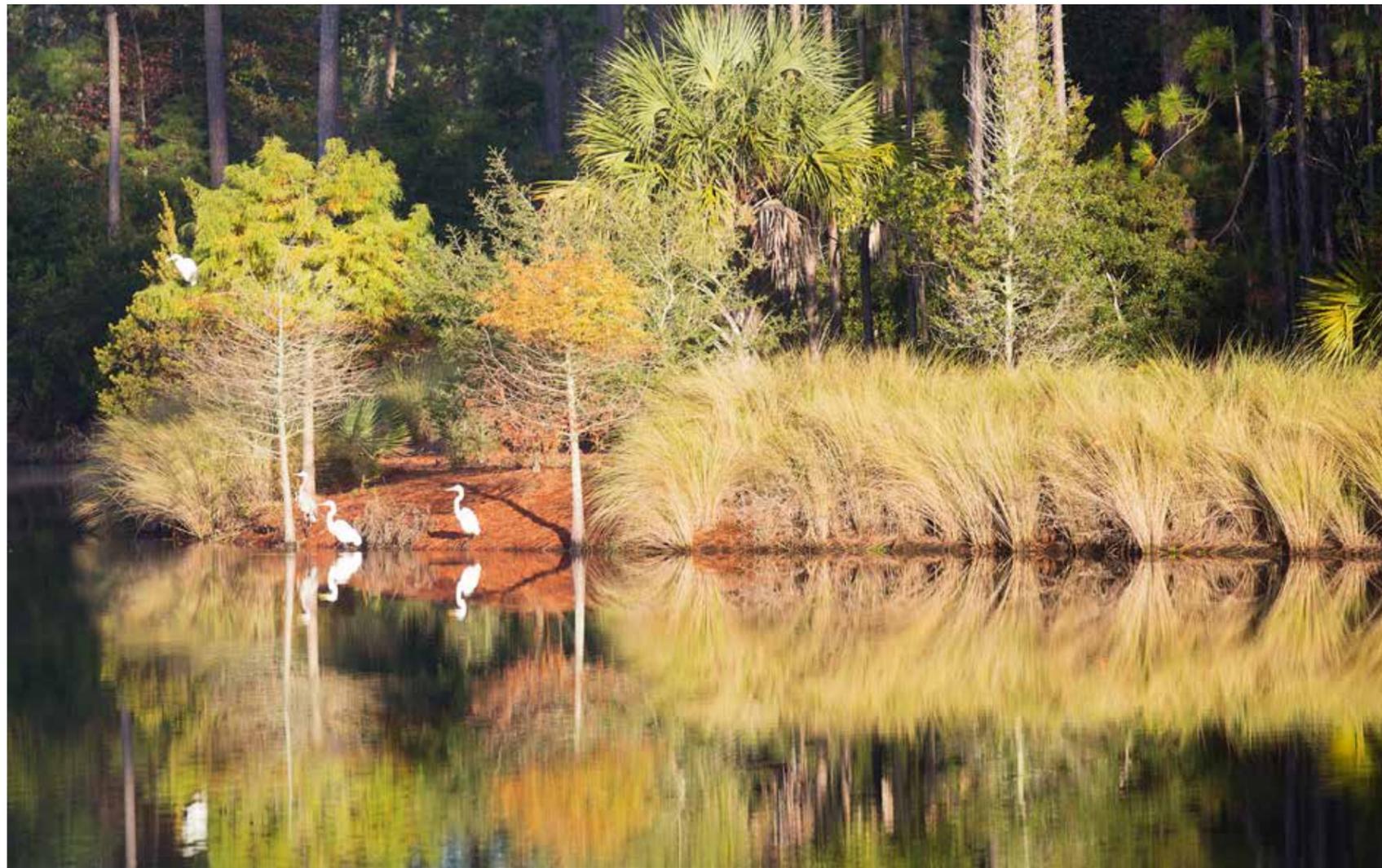
Tucked away in a sleepy corner of South Carolina's Low Country, Palmetto Bluff offers an authentic taste of old time America

WORDS AND PHOTOGRAPHY: NICK SMITH

If you ever had a hankering to be transported back in time, to an era of unhurried life in small town America where good taste and understated style are the order of the day, Palmetto Bluff is the place to visit. The largest waterfront property on the east coast of the United States, with 32 miles of riverfront, this stunning gated resort and nature reserve is a

world of extraordinary beauty, traditional architecture and laidback luxury.

On the one hand, elegant oaks line tranquil lawns with fish eagles circling high in the hot summer air. On the other, the calm sophistication of grand colonial residences is tastefully reflected in myriad ornamental lakes and waterways. Herons and egrets live alongside chapels and ▶



► spacious homesteads, while long secluded nature trails seem to take you into the very heart of the Deep South. Los Angeles and New York are not just miles, but also centuries away.

There's a nostalgia that recalls scenes from *Gone with the Wind*, and an atmosphere of old time southern American civility. Privacy is everything here; life is slow, easy and uncomplicated. But Palmetto Bluff is also a place to partake of slow-cooked cuisine, artisan wines and lightning-fast bluegrass music mixed with Southern boogie. Somewhere to let your hair down, take in a few hours sailing, play a round of golf – on a Jack Nicklaus golf course – or just watch the world go by with a handful of lazy alligators for company.

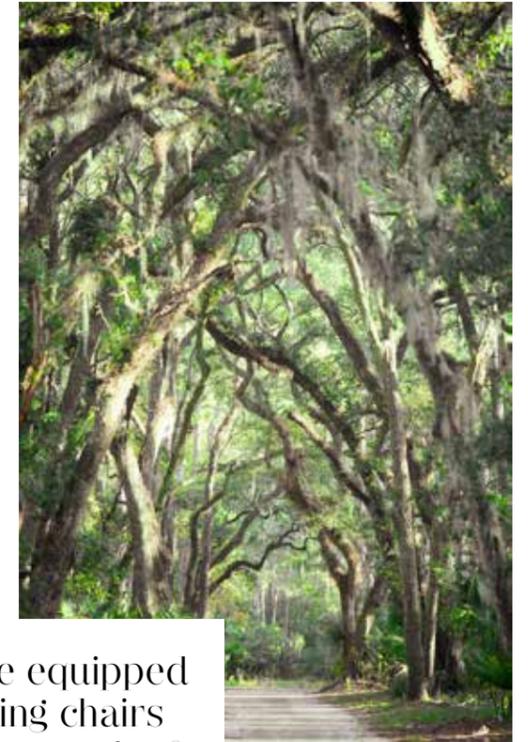
Nature is abundant here. Walk in the gardens at sunrise to experience an unforgettable moment as the sun rises over the May River, flashing gold and orange over the water bristling with birdlife (and even a few dolphins). Take a pushbike along awe-inspiring natural arches of live evergreen oaks. Watch the mist rise through an endless variety of trees and imagine yourself in a place that time seems to have temporarily forgotten. If hiking and gentle exploration appeals, then you'll lose

yourself in a wooden world of hickory, chestnut and cedar.

Most guests will stay at the magnificent Montage Hotel, a lakeside architectural masterpiece. Behind the picket fences, immaculate streets and manicured lawns, the interiors are sedately classic. The atrium sets the tone with ornately inlaid wooden floors and Persian carpets, glorious high ceilings, colossal open fires, oil portraits and formal Regency-style furniture typical of a plantation manor. Meanwhile, the cottages are more relaxed with bare brickwork, pastel soft furnishings, barbecues and plenty of cool air.

Gas lanterns line the streets, while porches and balconies are equipped with rocking chairs that seem to form so much of the social fabric of life in the Deep South. Guests gather here at the end of the day to swap tales under the watchful eye of the ever-present Old Glory flag. As quaint as it may seem, and as self-conscious as you may initially feel, they even have a word for this genteel pastime in the Low Country: 'porching'.

There's an al fresco approach to food, with hardly a formal dinner in sight. I don't think that I ate inside once and certainly my dinner jacket returned home unworn. Breakfasts tend to showcase the local delicacy of 'grits' (a sort of corn porridge) or biscuits and gravy, which is much nicer than it



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sounds, like a Southern version of scones. Depending on the time of year, barbecues are the order of the day: locally produced sliders (small beef burgers), corn dogs (artisan sausage in batter), grilled alligator, bison ribs, gumbo, local beers and bourbon.

There is also the option to stay in one of the resort's branded homes or, if you are of a mind to, buy one. The Bluff's real estate portfolio allows you to take up residence permanently in the stunning gated community (from about £1 million). Palmetto Bluff is an idyll of elegance and refinement, and the best part is that if you choose to invest here, you'll never have to leave. ■

From \$400 per night, room only, montagehotels.com

