

SWEET SECLUSION

Go off the grid on remote Bald Head Island

By Sam Boykin

FROM MY HOME in Davidson, North Carolina, I have a pretty heinous commute to work in uptown Charlotte. When I consider all the hours I spend in traffic, it's downright distressing. That's why, when it comes to vacations, I opt to go somewhere serene and congestion-free—somewhere like Bald Head Island (baldheadisland.com).

Situated along the southernmost end of the North Carolina coast, Bald Head Island marks the spot where the Cape Fear River and Atlantic Gulf Stream converge. Aside from the occasional maintenance vehicle, you won't find any cars there; most folks get around on golf carts, bikes, or their own two feet.



Golf cart through a maritime forest

While the island has a few traditional amenities—such as a country club, golf course, and spa—most of its 12,000 acres are protected marshes, creeks, and maritime forests, along with about fourteen miles of pristine beaches. It's a place where wildlife flourishes, from herons and egrets stalking their prey along the creeks, to fiddler crabs scuttling along the hiking trails, to sea turtles nesting on the beach.

Recently, my wife, Kimiko, our six-year-old daughter, Lily, and I decided to check out the island for the first time. When we arrived in the laid-back coastal town of Southport, we left our car parked at Deep Point Marina and boarded a ferry bound for Bald Head. About twenty-five tranquil minutes later, we pulled into the harbor, alongside a number of yachts, cruisers, and fishing boats.

As we rode the island's tram to our rental home, the oldest lighthouse in the state, nicknamed "Old Baldy," loomed above a cluster of trees to our left. In the distance, an expanse of salt marsh stretched to the horizon. Already I could tell this was my kind of place.

Our house was situated on the aptly named Live Oak Trail, near a creek and a salt marsh preserve. My daughter squealed when she saw two golf carts parked in the driveway for our use. While oceanfront homes certainly have their perks, I enjoyed being ensconced in a shady forest of live oaks, serenaded by a chorus of cicadas.



Bald Head Island has a long and storied past: Over the centuries, it has been home to Native Americans, pirates, and even Civil War soldiers. In the early 1970s, a handful of pioneering families began building vacation homes on it, but strict development regulations have kept the island's wild side protected. Today, there are only about 1,200 houses, with plenty of space between them, and not a single high-rise condo.

Once we got settled, Kimiko and Lily took off on a golf cart to check out the island, while I rented a kayak from Riverside Adventure Company, a local outfitter, and set off to explore Bald Head Creek. I glided through the primordial estuary, the only sound my paddle dipping into the brackish water. When I paused to let the cool breezes wash over me, an eagle launched itself from a tree in the distance and soared away.

During our second day, Lily (who inherited my love of critters and the outdoors) went exploring with me while my wife lounged by the pool. Just beyond the island's small central village—where there's



Oceanfront home on Bald Head Island's East Beach

If you love the solitude of Bald Head Island, you might also like ...

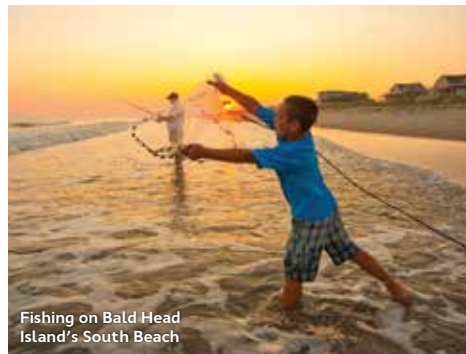


CUMBERLAND ISLAND, GEORGIA

From St. Marys, Georgia, it's a quick ferry ride to this off-the-grid destination that once served as a Carnegie family getaway. Explore the island via fifty miles of trails that wind through maritime forests and a designated wilderness area. Along the way, you'll discover eighteen miles of beaches and interesting historical sites such as First African Baptist Church, the 1893 chapel where John F. Kennedy Jr. and Carolyn Bessette tied the knot in 1996. What you won't find are snack bars or concession stands, so be sure to pack any food and drinks you may need, along with camping gear if you plan to stay overnight. The island has both developed and wilderness campsites, including a remote spot near the beach where you're likely to spot dolphins and manatees. If you don't feel like roughing it, book a room at the historic Greyfield Inn, built in 1900 as a Carnegie family residence and converted to an inn in 1962. nps.gov/cuis, greyfieldinn.com



Bald Head Creek boardwalk



Fishing on Bald Head Island's South Beach

a market and cafe, a spa, and about a half-dozen shops—we discovered a trail leading to the Maritime Forest Preserve; we were soon enveloped by the wood of towering oak, palmetto, and pine trees. Pressing deeper into the forest, we came to a clearing. A couple of brightly colored butterflies flitted past, and hundreds of giant red ants scurried over dark mounds of earth. On the way back to the road, my daughter gave chase to a pair of fiddler crabs darting in and out of their holes.

By that point, Lily was ready to join Kimiko at the pool. I decided to rent a standup paddleboard from Coastal Urge, the island's other outfitter. Launching from the main dock near the harbor, I cruised along the edge of the

creek, meandering into coves. The water was shallow, and several times I spotted the silvery dash of fish and the ghostly shadows of stingrays undulating along the creek's sandy bottom.

Even with the breezes whispering along the creek, I worked up a pretty good sweat. After returning my paddleboard, I joined the ladies for a cool dip in the pool. Then it was back to the house, where we dined on a feast of fresh crab legs from the village market. After days of exploring isolated trails and waterways and wandering lonely beaches, we had all eased into the island's soothing rhythm. We climbed into our golf cart for one last joyride as the sun slowly melted into the horizon.