

OUR INDISPENSABLE GUIDE TO GEORGIA COLLEGES

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FASHION!

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ISLAND *escapes*

Bald Head, North Carolina / Tybee, Georgia
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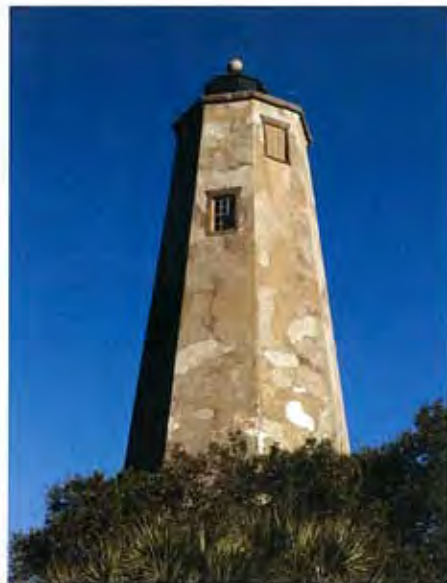
Bald Head Island

Unspoiled paradise off a North Carolina cape

EVEN IF THERE WEREN'T ANY PIRATE RELICS HERE, the ground floor of Old Baldy—North Carolina's oldest standing lighthouse, built in 1817—would still feel eerily like a colonial dungeon. A double-hung window, set nearly three feet deep into mottled plaster walls, allows little light into the murky octagonal chamber, with its ghostly rudder from a Spanish galleon wrecked off nearby Cape Fear. The keeper points out the signs for a cell phone audio tour and assures me the exit opens from the inside, pulling the hoary wooden door closed behind her with a disarmingly firm *thwack*. Ignoring my apprehensions, I punch in the number for the first audio message. Call failure. Damn iPhone. There's nothing else to do but start climbing.

One hundred and eight narrow wooden steps and a short ladder later, I emerge on top of the world. Vertigo quickly gives way to wonder as I behold the panoramic view of Bald Head Island—from the quaint, New England-style harbor at my feet, across a maritime forest so dense I can barely pick out the golf course, to the legendary Frying Pan Shoals, where hidden sandbars whip up frenzied breakers improbably far out to sea, confounding navigators as they have for hundreds of years. And, *eureka*, my iPhone comes alive.

The now accessible recorded message tells me how, in the early sixties, a



Bald Head Island, about an hour northeast of Myrtle Beach, is the southernmost of North Carolina's cape islands and the northernmost semitropical environment on the East Coast.



Bald Head Island Harbour

developer nearly filled in the primeval salt marshes to build hotel towers, an airport, an Indian village, and fake pirate boats. Fortunately, the state intervened. Today, 10,000 of the island's 12,000 acres are set aside as beach, marsh, and maritime forest preserves. Oceanfront houses sit far back from the water—beyond wild dunes waving with sea oats and twisted red cedars, which in turn offer refuge for wildlife and protect the beach from erosion.

Though the 1,126-home community has all the trappings of an upscale resort—two country clubs (and a chef once trained by Guenter Seeger), three nearby marinas, a golf course, and multi-million dollar homes—its chief asset remains the pristine setting. For starters, the island is accessible only by ferry or boat, and private cars are not permitted on shore. Local transportation is by bicycle or golf cart. The Bald Head Island Conservancy, founded to protect sea turtles, now studies and preserves all endangered barrier island habitats.

At the center of the island, the rare maritime forest is a magical place where sabal palms and gnarled live oaks weave a lush canopy dripping with Spanish moss. Visitors are awed by the ancient Timmons oak, which might have taken root when pirates such as Stede Bonnet and Edward Teach, aka Blackbeard, ruled the waters around Cape Fear in the eighteenth century. Step through the tangled underbrush to Ibis Pond, and you'll come upon dozens of regal white ibises and night herons—as enchanting and graceful as Sirens.

It is a landscape irresistible to explore, from boardwalks weaving through fertile marshes to wide, meditative beaches—devoid of crowded deck chairs because there are no high-rise hotels. It is impossible not to unwind here. You have to slow down when the speed limit is only 18 miles per hour. Pretty soon, you even quit looking for a cell signal.

—BETSY RILEY

STAY

The resort's wood-sided cottages have wide front porches, charming dormers, and neat white trim—a style known as “coastal vernacular.” Many come with “crofters,” cozy outbuildings with guest bedrooms on top of screened porches or golf cart garages. Rent homes directly from owners or through the extensive rental program (800-432-RENT, baldheadisland.com). The lone hotel, Marsh Harbour Inn, offers bed-and-breakfast rates (from \$275 nightly) or fractional ownership (marshharbourinn.com, 910-457-1702). One penthouse suite overlooks the harbor and offers both a master bedroom view of the sunrise and a sitting room view of the sunset. (And yes, the island does have cable, Wi-Fi, and cell service.)

EAT

Fine dining is available through two private clubs: the Shoals Club, which offers a dramatic beachfront on the island's point and two elegant pools, and the Bald Head Island Club, which includes a golf course, tennis courts, a pool, and a championship croquet greensward. The Shoals' chef, John Turner, is an alum of the Ritz-Carlton, Buckhead. Most rental homes offer access to one or both clubs (plus at least one golf cart). Eb & Flo's is a harborside steam bar with live music and nibbles such as lobster corn dogs—which don't skimp on either the lobster or the tempura batter (910-457-7217).

DO

Reach the resort via twenty-minute ferry rides that run every hour. Rent bikes or a golf cart to get around. Popular outdoor activities include kayaking, crabbing, fishing, birding, hiking, sailing, and various board sports. The conservancy leads sea turtle walks on summer evenings. The highly rated, links-style golf course—designed by George Cobb, a consultant to Augusta National—wraps around fifteen freshwater lagoons. Retail shops are few but attractive. There is also a day spa, as well as one grocery store with a popular cafe and ice cream parlor. Sites include Old Baldy lighthouse and an endearing marshfront chapel. Both the conservancy and the rental management company offer seasonal children's day camps.