

DEPARTURES



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**THE
SHOPPING
ISSUE**
EMERALDS
SLEEP CHIC
ROBES, SLIPPERS
SATINS AND SILKS
SKIING ITALY
YOUR OWN PRIVATE
CARIBBEAN

The plantation manor at Brays Island is used as guest quarters; the 18th hole at Harbour Town, below.



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Sea Pines Plantation and then Harbour Town, where the professionals still hit their tee shots on the 18th hole directly at the iconic red-and-white-striped lighthouse. The perfect three-season weather made this region the ideal golfing locale. Today Hilton Head alone has 23 courses.

The seed was planted and the young architects and businessmen who once worked for Fraser took the model and replicated it scores of times, from Savannah to Charleston and beyond: Kiawah, Palmetto Bluff, Long Cove, Brays Island, Briar's Creek, Seabrook Island, Spring Island, Callawassie, Chessee Creek, Bull's Bay, Daniel Island, Berkeley Hall, Colleton River, Belfair, Ford's Plantation, and on and on.

Even while absorbing new homes and more people, these old places are still mostly isolated and self-contained; they do not sprawl across the landscape. Make no mistake, these are for the most part private communities and clubs that strive to maintain an air of exclusivity. These oases are approached down country roads shaded by massive oaks dripping with Spanish moss.

The streets are dotted with tiny churches, little communities, country stores, barbecue joints, and small shops selling handmade sweetgrass baskets. The area still feels unique. You hear a kind of mantra among planners and developers and even politicians in South Carolina: "We don't want to look like Florida." So far that hasn't been a problem.

Briar's Creek, on Johns Island, sits across the marsh from massive and well-known Kiawah Island, about 20 minutes from Charleston. It is the newest of the modern plantations, with a course designed by Rees Jones, son of the fabled golf architect Robert Trent Jones. The nicely scaled clubhouse,

scheduled to open in December, overlooks the marsh and has a great view of Kiawah. So far the course is doing exactly what it was meant to do: attract golf lovers, many of them from the neighboring island who would like to belong to just one more golf club. It's a beautiful track that snakes through the marshland, around the ponds and lagoons and, as with most Rees Jones projects, displays a nearly delicate sensitivity to its environment while offering as much difficulty as any golfer could want. Especially striking is the par-three 17th, which plays 234 yards across the marsh from the very back tees. With the wind blowing, as it often does in the Low Country, it is the kind of hole that makes for sweaty palms.

Many of the newer developments have learned their environmental lessons, in no small part because habitat preservation creates a more desirable place to live. After all, both Kiawah and Briar's Creek have homes to sell. Between the two there are thousands of grand oaks (those that measure at least 24 inches in diameter and which are protected by a local statute).



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Golf

Bald eagles live along the marshes and the fairways. Resurrection fern—so called because it is a dull brown when dry but flashes nearly fluorescent green after a shower—grows on the huge oak branches.

Briar's Creek has 900 acres and could have accommodated 200 homes, but the developers will sell only 120 sites, setting aside the rest as a nature preserve and betting that beauty and higher prices will offset the smaller volume. Plots cost between \$500,000 and \$900,000, with one deepwater lot pegged at more than \$2 million. Memberships for landowners are another \$150,000.

Kiawah Island is now a thriving combination of 4,500 private homes and golf courses (the difficult-to-play and beautiful-to-walk River Course by Tom Fazio and the western Ireland links-style Cassique by Tom Watson), five resort courses open to the public (most notably Pete Dye's Ocean Course), and a world-class hotel called The Sanctuary. It wasn't always so. The development of the old island began in the seventies with a Kuwaiti group

One of the attractions of both Kiawah and Briar's Creek is their reasonable proximity to the southern delights of Charleston. But a new golf development is actually within the city limits. For decades the Guggenheim family and foundation controlled Daniel Island, just north and east of Charleston. It was used as a private hunting retreat, but the Guggenheim interests decided to monetize their asset and sell to the Daniel Island Company, who hired both Rees Jones and Tom Fazio to build a pair of courses both beautiful and challenging (though also lacking the dramatic landscape of either the beachfront or the marshy terrain of their more rural competitors to the south). Homes do line the fairways but generally only on one side, avoiding the "double-loading" that strangles so many development courses.

Nearby, the Daniel Island group erected both stand-alone houses and little neighborhoods of townhouses, all done in the southern architectural vernacular of the

Beaufort and Parris Island, the Marine training base. But gradually the privacy became an asset. Fazio began to build a course and the homes started to sell. Meanwhile, another developer attempted to get permission to construct a bridge from Callawassie Island to adjacent Spring Island, another old hunting preserve. The plan called for 5,500 homes. The bridge proposal was rejected and Chaffin stepped in with a plan for 410 home sites. The bridge was then approved, but Chaffin moved into a hunter's cabin right away and commuted by boat for two years while the bridge was being raised.

Arnold Palmer designed a watery and pure 18 holes on Spring that fits in with the notion of disturbing as little nature as possible, but to Chaffin that is almost beside the point. "People expect the golf to be well done," he says, "but they won't accept a community today that is only about one sport." All homes must be placed 150 feet from the road and the first 50 feet of that must be undisturbed natural

One player said that his best round was played in a blindingly dense fog, when he just hit the ball in the direction dictated by his caddy and hoped for the best.

looking to recycle petrodollars. When a world oil glut in the eighties stanchied that revenue stream, the project was essentially abandoned. Kiawah Development Partners eventually bought the property, and the 1991 Ryder Cup was staged on the just completed Ocean Course. The event itself was a spectacular contest that stood undecided until the final putt, which the European side missed. It put Kiawah on the map and the course has remained, for good reason, among the top-ranked tracks in the nation. Greens fees are about \$300 a round, plus the caddy fee. Membership for the two private courses, however, are only available to Kiawah property owners.

Some purists are a bit critical of the Dye design, saying it is too full of the architect's own perverse challenges and not true enough to the natural seaside landscape on which it sits. Either way it delivers an unforgettable golfing experience. Tackling it the winter months with, say, a 30-knot wind, is brutal. The layout is so visually intimidating that one overwhelmed visitor said his best round was played in a blindingly dense fog, when he simply hit the ball in the direction and to the distance dictated by his caddy and hoped for the best.

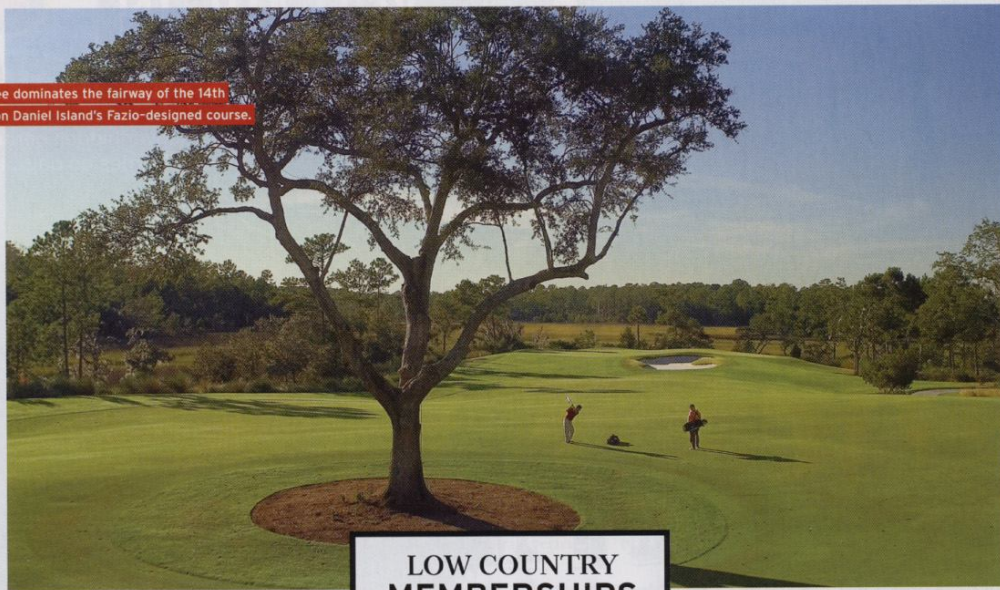
city of which they are an official part, a sort of in-town country club just ten minutes from the airport. The club and homes are on the northern part of the island, while at the center is a commercial zone with office buildings, excellent restaurants, and "affordable housing." There will be about 7,000 residences when Daniel Island is completed—and not a security gate in sight. Gatelessness was a condition of annexation set down by the local government, and thus these must be the only golf courses ever designed by recognizably named architects that ordinary citizens can actually drive through. About half the homes sold have gone to people who already live in town.

There is nothing vaguely urban about Spring Island, Callawassie Island, or Chechessee Creek Club. An hour and a half's drive south from Charleston, the three-community project was created by Jim Chaffin, who for ten years worked closely with Charles Fraser, as did his partner Jim Light. Their first project, begun in 1985, was Callawassie. "We were locationally challenged," says Chaffin. Hilton Head has its own airport and is closer to Savannah. Callawassie wasn't close to much of anything except the charming little town of

growth. Along with strict size limitations on structures—4,500 square feet max—the idea was to prevent competitive showplace homes from being erected (since none of the structures can be seen from the road). Spring Island is so naturally beautiful and so unspoiled by its development that the residents don't sell their homes very often. Less turnover means less competition for the developer in selling his lots. And the still-untamed nature of the place—1,000 acres are left untouched—is Spring Island's "brand essence," as Chaffin puts it. He never advertised or marketed the properties, just sold them by word of mouth. "We boiled a lot of shrimp and poured a lot of wine," he says. The result is a tight-knit community of like-minded people, many from the financial world in the north. One such resident is financier Robert Greenhill, who bought three lots on a little point and arrives regularly by seaplane. It is beyond argument that Spring Island is a gem, perhaps the most breathtaking of all in the Low Country.

Not satisfied with a single course, Chaffin then had Ben Crenshaw build Chechessee Creek across the water from Spring and Callawassie. This enterprise, he explains,

An oak tree dominates the fairway of the 14th hole on Daniel Island's Fazio-designed course.



LOW COUNTRY MEMBERSHIPS

was aimed at re-creating an old-fashioned course reminiscent of those by Allister McKenzie, Donald Ross, and Charles Blair Macdonald. In this regard Chaffin succeeded again. He is shooting for 375 members and 85 have already been sold to residents of Spring Island, people happy to add another golfing option to their vacations. Eventually there will be 45 small cottages on the property, but the track is mostly through woods and over marsh. Every green has an open front for the bump-and-run approach shot. Fox squirrels roam everywhere. Eagles soar. Which is not to say that playing Chechessee is idyllic. (The first hole, a dogleg left par four, will make you aware of that quite quickly.) The clubhouse is modest but handsome. "At last," Chaffin claims people say on entering the structure, "not a mansion." He does not mention it, but they also serve a spectacular southern breakfast.

Brays Island Plantation is not unlike Spring Island in that it has placed a very heavy emphasis on preserving the feel of the old estate once owned by Sumner Pingree, a New England Yankee. Owners have constructed discreet and understated buildings. The roadways are all sand and gravel. The setbacks are generous and the views over the river and marsh dazzling.

Brays Island Plantation Designer: Ron Garl. \$3,200 a year for property owners; braysisland.com

Briar's Creek Designer: Rees Jones. \$150,000 onetime fee; briarscreek.com

Callawassie Island Designer: Tom Fazio. \$75,000 a year plus \$50,000 onetime fee; callawassie.com

Cassique and River Designers: Tom Watson and Tom Fazio respectively. \$150,000 onetime fee plus annual resident dues of \$12,000; kiawahisland.com

Chechessee Creek Designers: Ben Crenshaw and Bill Coore. Local membership, \$8,000 a year plus \$80,000 onetime fee; national, \$4,600 a year plus \$48,000 onetime fee; chechesseecreek.com

Daniel Island Designer: Tom Fazio. Onetime fee, \$60,000-\$100,000; danielisland.com

Harbour Town Designer: Pete Dye. Public greens fee, \$190-\$295; seapines.com

Ocean Designer: Pete Dye. \$5,500 a year; kiawahresort.com

Sea Marsh Designer: Pete Dye. Public greens fee, \$70-\$140; seapines.com

Spring Island Designer: Arnold Palmer. \$8,500 a year plus \$125,000 onetime fee; springisland.com



The whitewashed-brick plantation house is used as a lodge by members and guests. Sitting on the veranda overlooking the river, drink in hand, one feels almost like a real southern planter.

Golf was really an afterthought at Brays, the only concession to modernity when Pingree set out to sell off the plantation. Not ready to foot the bill for a name designer, he found a Floridian architect of no particular fame. The result is a very pleasant, challenging enough layout with almost no visible houses to distract duffers from the fairways. What is noticeable, however, is the occasional thump of shotgun blasts from the property's shooting sites. "The homes are secondary to the plantation," says Perry Harvey, the director of sales for the island. And golf is secondary to the other activities at Brays. The plantation still plants grass crops to attract game birds. There is a fine equestrian facility and, as Harvey finished his paean to Brays, he had to ring off to join a fishing tournament. "If your friends can't find something to do here, get rid of them and get new friends," he jokes. Harvey is talking about Brays, but he could be speaking for all the Low Country's exquisite plantation developments. "This place is a nice reward for a life well lived," he says. ■