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Golden Isles of Georgia

Exploring St. Simons and Little St. Simons is like trespassing on splendor

BY TOM ZYDLER

Autumn in southern Georgia. The first cold front of the year has painted the vast salt marshes the color of burnished copper. Cruising south on the Intracoastal Waterway, we escaped the boxy condominium skylines of the coast near Savannah and navigated through labyrinths of what looked like undulating fields of wheat. In the tidewaters of Georgia we encountered a rich natural life; on the solid land of the outer islands we learned the colonial history.

Landing on the Atlantic beaches of Georgia's islands from the ICW is difficult, but one exception is the Hampton River. It separates Little St. Simons Island from St. Simons Island and leads to the ocean. At the mouth on the south side of the Hampton is Pelican Spit, a sand bar, crowned by a mop of sea oats and severed north to south by a tiny finger of water. The spit stops the ocean swell from rolling

in, making the anchorage very comfortable. In half an hour, we walked the width of Pelican and came within sight of Little St. Simons across the narrow channel. Although the island now functions as a private resort, we could still enjoy the beach up to high water level.

Later in the day, we ran the dinghy through the channel and anchored it to the shore of Little St. Simons. Then we strolled on for three miles, examining the stranded whelk shells; shells of hinged, fist-size bivalves; moon shells; shiny jingles and razor clams. The armors of shovel-shaped horseshoe crabs, a 400 million-year-old species related to trilobites and scorpions, littered the beach. The wreck of a tugboat, on an even keel in its moat in the sand, illustrated the dangers of shifting offshore shoals.

Side shows in the tributaries of the Hampton River could keep a curious



Zapala and Belle (top), survivors of the gilded 1920s, live in splendor at the Sea Island Yacht Club. A short distance south of St. Simons is the Jekyll Island Club House. Built in 1888, it is now a hotel and is typical of Southern architecture of the time.

TOM ZYDLER

cruiser distracted for weeks. Village Creek leads southward to Sea Island Yacht Club, where the sight of the 1923 *Zapala* and the 1929 *Belle*, motoryachts built by New York Yacht and Engine Co., takes you right back to the 1920s, when Harold Coffin built the Cloister Hotel on Sea Island, which fronts on the Atlantic. The Cloister opened in 1928 amid great hoopla and a visit from Calvin Coolidge. Later, the hotel played host to Eugene O'Neill, Charles Lindberg, U.S. presidents, chairmen of corporations, royal families and past and present celebrities. It remains trendy today.

Development here and there, however, does not interfere with the opportunity to commune with nature on the Hampton River. At anchor in a deep side branch, Pine Creek, we heard only wind sighing in the marshes and dolphins blowing in pursuit of mullet. Wood storks cruised above. Migrating ducks began to appear, too. We dinghied across Hampton River into Lawrence Creek, a wild stream echoing the wing beat of lesser scaups, until suddenly we spotted a weathered fish camp. To stretch our legs, we walked under the arching oaks toward the camp. A hut made of tabby (a mixture of oyster shells, lime and sand) hid under the Spanish moss, its door wide open—a gallery. Oils of marsh-scapes hung under cobwebbed rafters, and a note “I am at the dock.” Peggy Buchan, the artist and the boat hoist operator, confirmed upon her return that the hut had housed slaves when the area thrived on cotton and rice plantations.

Hampton River Club Marina, at the north apex of the river, covers the site of a plantation bought in 1774 by Major Pierce Butler, a British officer from a minor nobility and a successful fortune hunter through marriage. An absentee owner, active as a pro-slavery senator, he denied his slaves contact even with the neighboring Cannon Point Plantation owned by John Couper, a gregarious and humane Scot. Today only broken tabby walls remain, scattered near new homes tastefully hidden within live oak coppices. Cannon Point, across Jones Creek from Hampton, looked temptingly wild with tall ruins peeking

through trees.

Leaving the dinghy roped to a tree root on Jones Creek, we struck eastward through tangled saplings mixed with ancient oaks and pines. We hoped to see the olive grove and date palms that John Couper cultivated in the 18th century. Instead, we broke free of the bushes at the remains of a large tabby house with an intact chimney. Our excitement cooled off when a man approached to tell us we were trespassing. “But we saw no signs,” we said.



In summer, the spartina grasses are a vivid green, but when autumn brings the first frost, these grasses turn the color of burnished copper. The lowlands of coastal Georgia, sliced haphazardly by rivers and creeks into hundreds of islands, are a nature-loving cruiser's paradise. You would need years to explore every nook and cranny.

“No,” he said, “the signs line the road that runs the length of St. Simons. No exotic fruit, either, the last date palm died 10 years ago,” he added.

We had better luck visiting the site of the first English settlement. After a short return southward on the Intracoastal we hung a left into Frederica River. Soon we had to swerve around a crossing alligator; another, slumbering on the bank, launched with an explosion of flying mud. We anchored off Fort Frederica, a 1736 compound begun by General James E. Oglethorpe, the founder of Savannah, as a bastion against the Spanish in Florida. An old powder magazine and cannons overlooked the bend in the river, and we braced for another trespass. “Landing prohibited,” warned our chart, but the sign on a tiny National Park Service dock welcomed us: “For dinghies only.”

Ashore, besides the barracks ruins, we found the foundations of houses. The old cemetery and a superb visitor's center under stupendous live oaks dripping curtains of Spanish moss completed the site.

Frederica River flows the western shore of St. Simons and once carried all waterborne commerce. Today, a fixed low bridge slashes across it. To reach Golden Isles Marina, south-bound yachts must return to the Intracoastal, go south for a couple of miles then turn north, back into Frederica River and the marina. A valid reason to stop there is to get on the island history tour run by St. Simons Transit Co. Bob Hatchell, a local author who leads the tour, makes events from the past come alive. □

Tom Zydler is a regular contributor to YACHTING.