

Southern Getaway

5 REASONS TO VISIT HILTON HEAD ISLAND, SOUTH CAROLINA

BY DIANA BALLON

Many people equate Hilton Head with golfing, but this South Carolina island is about far more than swinging a club. With its southern hospitality, delicious seafood, beautiful beaches, plethora of cycling trails and Gullah culture, it's no wonder that both *Travel + Leisure* and *Condé Nast Traveler* rated it the top island in the United States. And now, with several daily flights from Toronto six months of the year, Canadians have easier access to this sub-tropical destination than ever before.

On a recent visit, we took Air Canada's two-hour-and-15-minute flight to nearby Savannah and then drove the additional 45 minutes to the island. Once there, we learned how to navigate this 12-mile long and five-mile wide island based on its shoe-shaped anatomy: you can find its famous, candy-striped lighthouse at the toe, pass over the shoelace-shaped Broad Creek at its centre and visit Pinckney Island National Wildlife Reserve off the coast of its ankle.

Hilton Head is divided up into gated communities or what the area refers to as "resorts." These are communities of about 2,000 acres—a couple that are private and the rest that are semi-private, but still open to the public, offering everything from shopping to restaurants, golf courses, hotels and rental properties. Navigating between these communities, you traverse a main thoroughfare bordered by a canopy of live oak trees with their distinctive branches draped in Spanish moss. The road is noticeably absent of neon signs or billboards, and a separate bike path runs adjacent to the main road, part of a network of more than 100 miles of trails.

At night, much of your exploration will be lit under a clear, star-filled sky. As one of the first eco-planned communities in the world—and the first in the United States—artificial light is minimal. This includes no streetlights and lights-out rules that prohibit buildings from casting light onto the beach in the evenings from May to October (the loggerhead sea turtle's nesting season).

If you're not yet convinced of the peaceful, nature-loving, wildlife-friendly vibe of this island, here are five other reasons to visit.



1 DAUFUSKIE ISLAND

If you're interested in delving into the region's past, you will discover the influence of the Gullah people, descendants of mainly West Africans who first came to the island as slaves, and who eventually formed the first freedmen's village in the United States. Many of the Gullah people live on Daufuskie Island, population 400, which is a tranquil retreat one nautical mile off of Hilton Head Island and only accessible by boat.

Once there, you can hop in a golf cart—the main mode of transportation—to explore. Private resorts and clubs, elegant homes and rental villas sit alongside championship golf courses, a rum distillery, and artisan shops and workshops, a community farm and Marshside Mama's Café. There is also a beautiful three-mile beach. But you won't find a grocery store.

Inquire about Gullah heritage tours, distillery and kayaking and birding tours on the region's website (visitdaufuskie.org).

2 SPORTS

With more than 24 championship courses—including courses designed by golf legends, like Robert Trent Jones Sr. and Jack Nicklaus—perhaps it's no wonder that Hilton Head has been nicknamed "The Golf Island" and consistently appears on top 10 lists. Although the best time to golf tends to be spring and fall, golfing in winter is still usually possible in a light jacket. The Harbour Town Golf Links is one of the most iconic courses, with the lighthouse as a scenic backdrop.

Tennis is also big. There are more than 300 courts, in all three grand slam surfaces, and many highly rated tennis camps and resorts.



3 THE FOOD

For seafood lovers, the sheer plethora of choice on Hilton Head makes this island a gastronomic wonder. There are more than 250 restaurants, featuring upscale lounge eating, like you'll discover at the Ocean Lounge, to more casual waterfront dining at the Skull Creek Boathouse.

The Lowcountry cuisine here—food traditionally associated with the South Carolina and Georgia coast—was introduced by West African slaves who were brought to the region, along with hints of southern cooking, and New Orleans- and Cajun-style influences. Traditional Lowcountry cuisine includes everything from she-crab soup to rice, okra, tomatoes and greens, along with Lowcountry boil, or Frogmore stew, which is a one-pot meal of shrimp, potatoes, sausage and corn. Oyster roasts are also popular from September through April.

Other typical foods of the region include shrimp and grits, crab cakes, baked macaroni and cheese, cornbread, pimento cheese—"the caviar of the south"—and boiled peanuts.

Some great restaurant choices include Red Fish, where I had a delicious plate of scallops with lobster mac and cheese, the best fresh and fried green tomatoes, and a delicious Chablis selected from the shelves of the wine room (for a reasonable \$10 corkage fee). Another highlight was Lucky Rooster, self-described as an "American bistro with Southern soul." The duck with cherry chutney and roasted peanuts was sublime, the deep-fried cheese bread with walnuts and honey was a treat, and the Captain Crunch ice cream for dessert? Well, that was perfect.



4 BEACHES AND RESORTS

With 12 miles of coastline, Hilton Head has some of the top family beaches in the United States, where visitors can swim and bike along the sand. Although all the beaches on the island are public, access to them is often on private property, if you are not already staying at a beachside property. Coligny Beach Park is popular with good parking, a shopping plaza and easy walking distance to restaurants.

As a luxury destination, Hilton Head also has many high-end accommodations, including six AAA Four Diamond resorts with spas, outdoor pools and fine dining. Other beachside accommodations include golf villas, vacation rental homes and smaller service hotels with fewer amenities and restaurant options, but cheaper rates.

We loved our stay at The Westin Hilton Head Island Resort & Spa, which recently completed a \$30 million renovation. It has a beautiful, quiet beach, great outdoor pools, a spa, excellent morning yoga classes on the beach and very comfy beds.



5 OUTDOOR ADVENTURE

As the first eco-planned community in the United States, Hilton Head is a green island with an abundance of wildlife and a biodiversity that Tim Johnson, our captain on an Outside Hilton Head dolphin tour, says rivals the Amazon.

Although we saw a good 20 bottlenose dolphins when we motored out of Shelter Cove Marina down Broad Creek and entered into Calibogue Sound, you can spot dolphins around the whole island.

You can also get an aerial view of the island while soaring through the trees with Zipline Hilton Head. Over a couple of hours, we crossed a couple of swinging bridges and did eight ziplines and climbed a wooden tower up 75 feet, which is one of the tallest legally accessible points on the island, since no structures can be built higher than the trees.

Other ways to traverse beach and green spaces are on horseback through the Sea Pines Forest Preserve, on foot and by cycling.

