

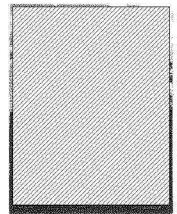


COASTAL TREASURES

Charleston may be the jewel of South Carolina, but its bounty of surrounding beach towns are some of the area's most precious gems.

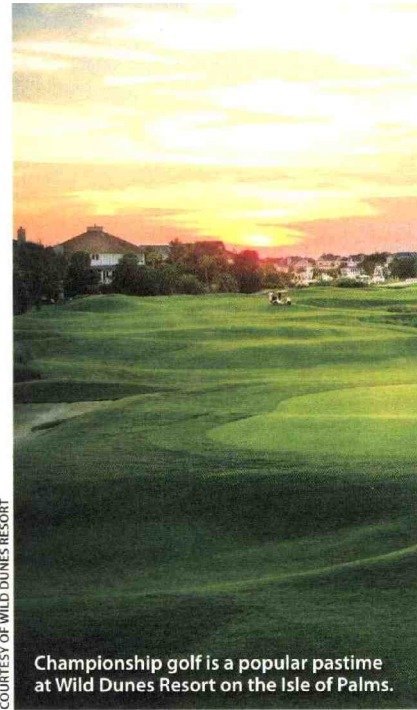
BY STACY TILLIE

We've just returned from a short afternoon stroll on a wide, soft swath of sandy shoreline, with our hands cupping a treasure-trove of shells we've unearthed from a tidal pool, when my daughter spots them: our flip-flops, Crocs, buckets and shovels floating out to sea with the rising tide. A kind stranger has already moved our chairs to higher ground, and now a few other friendly beachgoers are helping us fish out our belongings, which are somersaulting in the warm, frothy surf. We express a thousand thank-you's for their generous help, but they seem to think nothing of it. For this is the sort of Southern hospitality that comes naturally to folks here in Folly Beach, South Carolina, where life is laid-back, smiles are sincere and people don't think twice about helping complete strangers.





Beachwalker County Park offers public beach access on famed Kiawah Island.



Championship golf is a popular pastime at Wild Dunes Resort on the Isle of Palms.

"Folly Beach is one of America's last true beach towns," says Carl Hally of the Folly Beach Tourism Board. "We are a funky, laid-back, come-as-you-are kind of beach. We take life at a slower pace so that we can enjoy the beautiful island we live on and the wonderful people that we get to see every day. We love visitors on Folly and aim to make them feel right at home."

Indeed, it's easy to feel at home on this 12-square-mile barrier island, just 9 miles from charming Charleston. Billing itself as the "Edge of America," the island lays claim to miles of inviting public beaches, including a stellar surfing beach; the second-longest fishing pier on the East Coast, reaching more than 1,000 feet into the ocean; abundant wildlife, from bottlenose dolphins to loggerhead sea turtles to Wilson's plover; views of the 1876 Morris Island Lighthouse, now defunct but still standing sentry some 300 yards offshore; and the historic Porgy House, an unassuming cottage where celebrated writers DuBose and Dorothy Heyward resided in the 1930s. (George Gershwin also composed his famous opera *Porgy and Bess* nearby, though just a few years

later, the home would be destroyed in a hurricane.)

You'll also find a main street lined with casual eateries and eclectic shops, eco-tours galore with everything from kayaking and paddle boarding to salt-marsh cruises, and a handful of festive events—think a Bill Murray Look-a-Like Polar Bear Plunge and a New Year's Eve Flip-Flop Drop. "And, of course, [Folly Beach] has the most majestic sunsets you'll ever see," says Hally, adding, "No, we are not biased; it's true!"

The best way to explore the island is on foot, by bicycle or via electric cart. Touring around, take in the pretty patchwork of homes, from quaint cottages to modern condos to sprawling seaside mansions, many of which are available for rent. The island is also home to one hotel, the full-service oceanfront Tides Hotel, as well as cozy little inns.

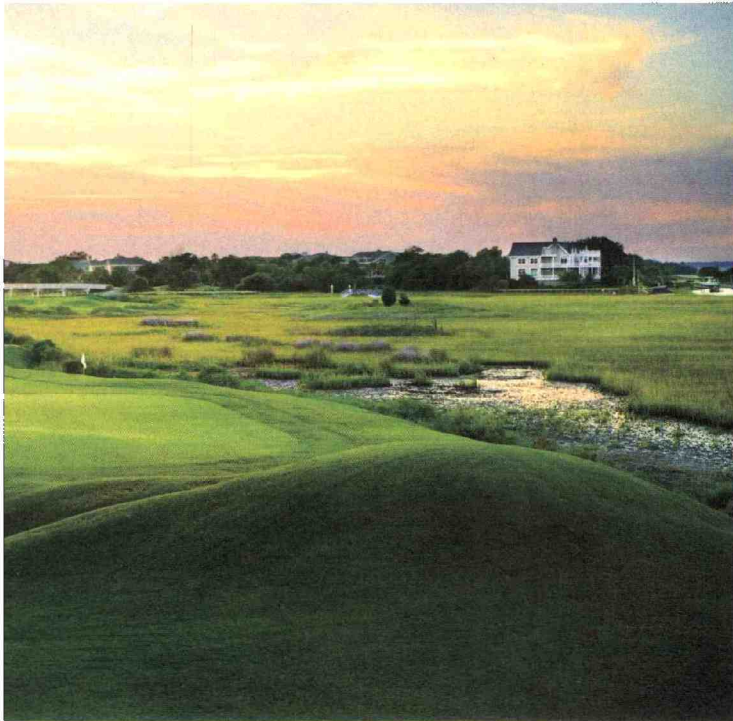
While Folly may be the closest beach town to Charleston, it's just one of a small five-piece jigsaw puzzle of islands, each with its own special vibe, composing Charleston's beach scene. And perhaps the most famous of the five is cultured Kiawah Island.

YOUR OWN PRIVATE PARADISES

A barrier island just 21 miles from Charleston, **Kiawah Island** was rated the number-one island in North America—and number-two island in the world—in *Condé Nast Traveler's* 2014 Readers' Choice Awards as well as ranked among the top 10 beaches in America (at number 8) by Dr. Stephen Leatherman, a.k.a. Dr. Beach, in 2015. *Coastal Living* also called it "The Happiest Seaside Town in America."

Such accolades are well-earned for this upscale gated island featuring a 10-mile stretch of immaculately maintained beaches, some 30 miles of paved walking and biking trails, and thousands of acres of lush marshland and primeval maritime forests. Here, you'll also find a verdant tapestry of golf courses carpeting the island, including those at the award-winning **Kiawah Island Golf Resort**.

Championship golf, of course, takes center stage at the resort with five courses that include The Ocean Course, site of the 1991 Ryder Cup, the 2012 PGA Championship and (soon-to-be) 2021 PGA Championship. Tennis fans will also delight in the resort's two tennis complexes



COURTESY OF WILD DUNES RESORT



Quintessential Southern fare is served up daily at the Wild Dunes Resort.

and The Barth Tennis Academy, where you can learn from world-ranked pros. But you don't have to love golf or tennis to love this resort. Recreation abounds, with opportunities for naturalist-led kayak tours, stand-up paddle boarding, eco-cruises, birdwatching excursions, charter fishing, beachcombing expeditions, bike rides on the beach and more.

Two must-do's when visiting the resort are venturing on a dolphin encounter and indulging in an oyster roast, recommends resort spokesman Mike Vegis. "For a great Lowcountry dining experience, the resort [hosts] the Mingo Point Oyster Roast and BBQ every Monday all summer long and around the holidays," he says. "Also, go on one of the [resort's] dolphin cruises or kayak tours, where it's possible to witness dolphin strand feeding." This phenomenon, unique to South Carolina (and Georgia), entails groups of bottlenose dolphins herding schools of fish onto the shore of the Kiawah River, where the dolphins then belly up to the beach to snag their catch.

Resort amenities on the island are available to guests staying at The Sanctuary

Hotel—a AAA Five Diamond oceanfront property replete with 255 rooms and suites, a full-service spa and a half-dozen dining venues—as well as those staying in the resort's villas and private-home rentals. Throughout this master-planned island, you'll also find a vast collection of independently owned home rentals and a new Marriott boutique hotel, the Andell Inn, that afford access to enjoy the island.

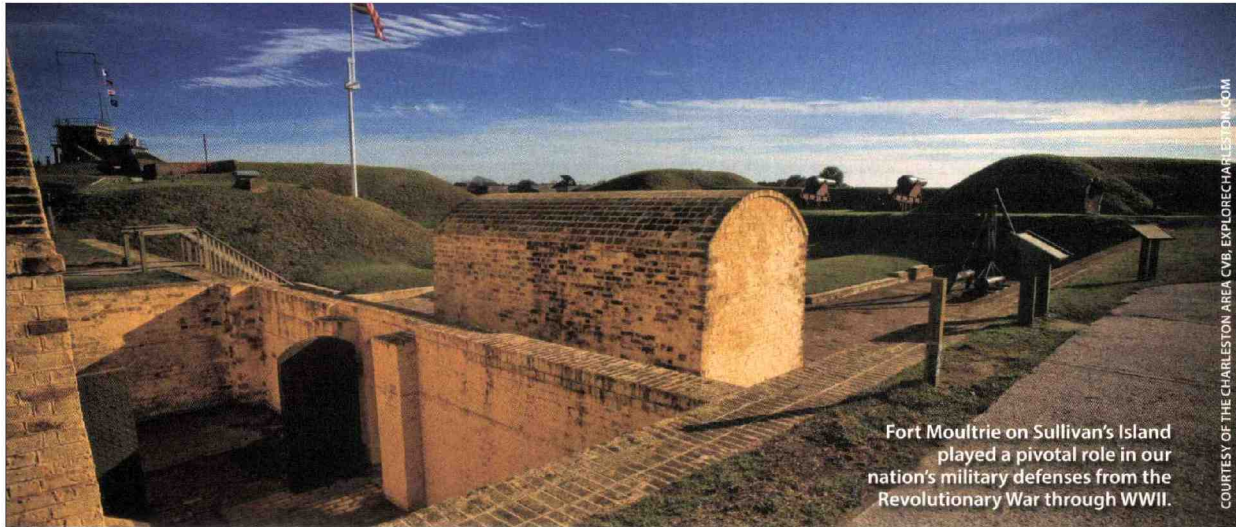
Daytrippers can visit Kiawah's beautiful beaches at Beachwalker County Park on the island's west end. "When the [Kiawah Island Golf Resort] was established back in 1976, the resort's owners donated the first fifth of the island to the county," explains Vegis. "They turned that into a public park, making Kiawah's beach available to the general public."

Perhaps even more secluded is Kiawah's next-door neighbor: **Seabrook Island**, a private island community boasting three miles of pristine shoreline accessible to those staying in any of the island's rental villas and homes. Playing championship golf and tennis, boating with proximity to a deep-water marina and simply exploring the unspoiled natural environment are

popular pastimes here. Horse enthusiasts will want to visit the full-service Equestrian Center, offering the opportunity to ride horses on trails along the beach—something folks here call "embracing your coastal cowboy."

ISLANDS IN THE SUN

If the beach resort lifestyle beckons, you have another award-winning option on the Isle of Palms, about a half-hour drive northeast of Charleston, at the **Wild Dunes Resort**. Nestled between the Atlantic Ocean and the Intracoastal Waterway, this 1,600-acre oceanfront playground offers the quintessential South Carolina beach staples: world-class golf and tennis, a melting pot of restaurants, miles of well-preserved beaches and recreation aplenty. In fact, Wild Dunes' Island Adventures activities, from kite sails to marsh excavations, are recognized as some of the best in the U.S. by *Travel + Leisure*. There's even a new Playing with Fire Ironworking Experience in which guests can create iron artwork. The resort's two golf courses—the Harbor Course and newly renovated Links Course, designed



by Tom Fazio—also consistently earn spots in lists of the country's leading courses. And its tennis offerings—17 courts, including a stadium court—put it among the top-ranked tennis resorts by *Tennis* magazine.

Access to the resort's amenities are available to guests staying at either of two AAA Four Diamond hotels—The Boardwalk Inn, just 150 yards from the beach, and the adjacent Village, featuring rooms that connect to form multi-room family suites—or in any of the resort's condos, cottages or vacation homes.

Beyond the resort, just 12 miles from Charleston, the Isle of Palms is a classic beach town in its own right with miles of well-protected public beaches, scores of local shops and restaurants, frequent live music emanating from open-air bars and virtually infinite opportunities for family-friendly fun.

"Bordered by pristine beaches and a network of marsh creeks, Isle of Palms is a heaven for vacationers and is just as photogenic as it is fun, offering guests a laid-back and less-crowded spot to enjoy great fishing, beach access and golf," says Charlotte Park, a spokesperson for the Wild Dunes Resort.

In the heart of town, Isle of Palms County Park is a popular gathering point, offering a sand volleyball court, picnic areas and a children's play area. And if you happen to time your visit during

Charleston's annual Piccolo Spoleto Festival, held May 27–June 12 this year, head to Front Beach to ogle over-the-top sand sculptures in a competition that draws thousands of spectators.

Wherever you stay on the island—whether at Wild Dunes, either of the two oceanfront hotels (the newly renovated Seaside Inn or The Palms Oceanfront Hotel, currently under full renovation but expected to reopen in mid-2016) or any of a wealth of vacation home or condo rentals—you're not far from all the best this beach haven has to offer.

You're also not far from the small-knit community and slower pace of life on neighboring Sullivan's Island, a 3.3-square-mile tony beach town tucked at the mouth of the Charleston Harbor. Here, the beachfront is owned by the town, and you won't find any hotels, motels, bed-and-breakfasts or strip malls. What you will find are al fresco restaurants and independent shops sprinkled along the main thoroughfare, surrounded by tidy historic homes and multimillion-dollar mansions—many of which are available as vacation rentals.

History on the island runs deep. Sadly, in the 1700s, the island's strategic location made it a major disembarkation point for the tens of thousands of Africans brought here as slaves through the Middle Passage. Today, a small bench with a plaque, placed at historic Fort Moultrie as part of the Toni

Morrison Society's Bench by the Road project, serves as a somber reminder of that sorrowful past.

Fort Moultrie is also the site of centuries-old military history. When British warships attacked the fort on June 28, 1776, it wasn't even completed; nevertheless, thanks to the soft palmetto logs with which it was built, the fort was able to repel—and even absorb—the incoming cannon balls during a nine-hour battle that marked the first victory over the British Navy (hence, the prized palmetto on South Carolina's state flag and the observance of Carolina Day on June 28). The fort played a pivotal role in later defenses as well, up through WWII, which the National Park Service interprets for visitors today. You can also learn about Edgar Allan Poe's time here when he was stationed with the U.S. Army from 1827 to 1828. Poe later used the island as the setting for his short story "The Gold Bug," and the local library is named after him.

Whether you want to discover rich history, thriving nature, boundless recreation, unique shopping, good food or friendly people, you can't go wrong wherever you turn in any of Charleston's beach towns. For around every corner is a hidden gem to be uncovered, a new experience to be cherished and perhaps even a gracious local to save your flip-flops from the rising tide. <<