

# Gourmet Getaways

## EDISTO ISLAND, SOUTH CAROLINA

For me, the shortest distance between work and play is a place that is easily accessible yet remote enough to properly stem the tide of everyday cares. Both requirements are met on Edisto, a South Carolina barrier island that by temperament does not suffer kindly the querulous voice of worry.

Edisto's fifty-four square miles are adjacent to thousands of acres of environmentally protected land defined by the Ashepoo, Combahee, and Edisto rivers. The forty-five-minute drive south to the island from Charleston is an ideal introduction to the singular beauty of these pristine wetlands. Ancient live oaks, sinuous and vast, border the road, their twisted boughs draped with sage-colored tendrils of Spanish moss. This lush green thicket parts occasionally to reveal timeworn houses and farm stands overflowing with tomatoes, squash, okra, and cucumbers. The arched concrete bridge to the island, which sweeps over a marshy stretch of the Dawhoo River, represents a rare and much-debated acquiescence to the dictates of progress.

I made my weekend trip to Edisto with a

hometown friend from South Carolina. We stayed at Cassina Point, a restored 145-acre plantation on the National Register of Historic Places and the island's sole bed-and-breakfast, which, incidentally, has only four rooms and is not yet equipped with the technology to handle credit cards. (For those desiring a longer stay, rentals are available by contacting the Edisto Chamber of Commerce). As we neared the cypress gates separating the main house from its accompanying fields, a dozen wild turkeys bustled out of our path. From a small saltwater pond close by, a great blue heron offered a courteous, if indifferent, nod.

Upon our arrival we were offered wine and hors d'oeuvres made from freshly caught crabs. From the veranda we gazed upon a stunning stretch of golden marshland blanketing the North Edisto River. In Edisto's heyday in the 1800s, its numerous tidal creeks were the life vein of the island. Tidewater planters of high-quality long staple, or "sea island" cotton relied on these inlets as their main route of commerce. Today, water passage is at the mercy of a good tide, and most inhabitants of

these intricate estuaries are of the non-human variety: among them porpoises, alligators, ospreys, egrets, and ducks.

The ebb and flow of a rich history survives throughout Edisto. The name originated with the island's first inhabitants, the Edistow Indians, whose landmark Indian Mound of oyster shells attests to a longtime passion for seafood. Scrawled autographs and drawings left by occupying Union soldiers cover the basement walls of Cassina Point, and locals tell of ghosts that rattle against the modern world bewailing long-past misfortunes. One such spirit is young Amelia Jenkins, shot by a spurned lover on her wedding night. She makes an occasional cameo appearance in the ruins of the Brick House Plantation. (A two-hour historical tour of the island surveys the grounds of many of these majestic homes and a handful of Edisto's churches.)

The sea's treasures remain the literal foundations of many island buildings: Antebellum structures are grounded with "tabby," oyster shells and sand mixed with lime or gravel, a substance that has proven nearly indestructible through ravages natural and otherwise. A shelling trip to a secluded beach yields a shimmering find of cockleshells, whelks, sand dollars, and pearly conches. The islanders' reverence for nature is evident on a moonlit summer night, when the giant loggerhead turtles come ashore to lay their eggs. So as not to interrupt these nocturnal pilgrimages, residents graciously turn off nearby lights.

Philip Bardin, chef-owner of The Old Post Office restaurant, lends a delightful new twist to Southern mainstays. The fried shrimp pâté with tomato and jalapeño chutney is a heavenly homespun starter. Another local favorite, from nearby Orangeburg, is the onion sausage, which is grilled and finished with a black bean sauce. Fresh pecans constitute the crust of a sumptuous roast quail made hearty with a reduced duck stock.

The new bridge has been grudgingly accepted, but, thankfully, change on the island is never at the cost of its many virtues. On Edisto, an unwavering commitment to preservation abides, and this commitment can be relied upon as implicitly as the morning tide. ♦

—Maura Hogan

*Cassina Point, the island's sole bed-and-breakfast*

