

Room to RELAX

Today's Hilton Head-area accommodations — vacation rentals, hotels, boutique inns, timeshares and permanent homes — are big on luxurious amenities, with enough room for family, friends, even Fido. *by Marie McAden*



Vacation rental homes like this one increasingly offer stylish comforts and space for multiple families. Opposite page: cottage bath at the Inn at Palmetto Bluff.

Family vacations aren't what they used to be — Mom, Dad and the kids packed in the station wagon. More often now, families travel with an entourage of extended family and friends, groups that demand bigger and better accommodations.

"The shift came after 9/11, when people began reflecting on the frailty of life," says Tom Ridgway, owner of Hilton Head Rentals and Golf. "The family vacation became an opportunity to bond with your loved ones."

Family reunions have become especially popular on Hilton Head Island. With almost 6,000 villas and homes on the rental market, visitors have their choice of a wide range of accommodations, from cozy one-bedroom bungalows to luxurious

seven-bedroom oceanfront estates. Many even allow the family pet.

Whether they're fronting the ocean, or a bicycle ride from the beach, the most popular properties are those with premium features and updated furnishings.

"The trend is for more luxury," says Steve Birdwell, Sea Pines Resort general manager. "People want the same finishes and fixtures they have in their own homes. Flat panel TVs and high-speed wireless Internet are a must."

In the busy summer season, weekly rental rates run anywhere from \$700 to \$19,000 a week. They drop as much as 30 percent in the spring and fall and 50 percent in the winter.

Even at the much-heralded Palmetto Dunes, which boasts three top-rated golf courses and a tennis center ranked among

the 50 best in the U.S. by *Tennis* magazine, plans are in the works for a multimillion-dollar modernization and beautification project that will enhance miles of leisure trails, spruce up landscaping and improve street lighting in the 2,000-acre resort community.

Hotels get facelift

The many premier hotels on the island also have responded to the public's appetite for luxury with recent renovations to their properties and the addition of spas and other amenities.

In May, the Westin Hilton Head Island Resort & Spa opened the first Heavenly Spa in the continental United States. The \$4 million, 8,000-square-foot facility features nine deluxe treatment rooms, among them an opulent couple's suite with dual

beds and an oversized soaking tub. Other hotel updates included new carpeting, lighting and artwork in all guest corridors and upgraded fitness equipment in the WestinWorkout Powered by Reebok, a state-of-the-art gym offering a full range of activities from running, bicycling and swimming to calisthenics, yoga and pilates.

This past fall, the Hilton Oceanfront Resort in the Palmetto Dunes plantation started a \$3.5 million renovation of its dining areas. Its Mostly Seafood restaurant will be converted into a lounge and nightclub while Regatta's Lounge will be turned into a fine dining restaurant and The Deli and Palmetto Café into a grab-and-go eatery.

Nearby, within the same plantation, the Hilton Head Marriott Resort & Spa has introduced a 6,400-square-foot Spa Soleil, part of a \$20 million hotel improvement project.

At the Crowne Plaza Resort, close to \$1 million has been spent to upgrade the hotel's oceanfront pavilion and fitness center and improve its wireless Internet reception. The hotel is located in Shipyard Plantation,

The many premier hotels on the island have responded to the public's appetite for luxury with recent renovations to their properties and the addition of full-service (think weekend-long indulgence) spas and other amenities such as state-of-the-art fitness facilities.

close to the world-famous Van der Meer Tennis Center.

Travelers preferring a more intimate setting can choose from several boutique hotels renowned for their personal service. The European-style Inn at Harbour Town in the Sea Pines Resort aims for first-class service all around. Guests are attended by private butlers, many of them dressed in authentic Prince Charlie kilts, a nod to the Scottish influence of golf and the celebrated Harbour Town Golf Links, which the inn overlooks. The Inn also

offers complimentary tennis at the racquet club out its front door and free bicycles for a two-wheeled tour of Sea Pines or an easy trip to the boutiques, dining, boating and entertainment available in Harbour Town.

Inland, the Main Street Inn & Spa near the entrance to Hilton Head Plantation pampers its guests with velvet and silk brocade linens, feather duvet comforters and marble bathrooms.

Off island, the Inn at Palmetto



Where to Stay

HOTELS

Crowne Plaza Hilton Head Island Beach Resort

An oceanfront resort in Shipyard Plantation. www.cphiltonhead.com, 800-334-1881

Daufuskie Island Resort & Breathe Spa

Antebellum inn, cottages, spa and golf. www.daufuskieislandresort.com, 800-648-6778

Hilton Head Marriott Resort & Spa

Oceanfront luxury with golf courses close by. www.hiltonheadmarriott.com, 800-295-5998

Hilton Oceanfront Resort

On the grounds of Palmetto Dunes, featuring Ocean Tides Spa. www.hiltonheadhilton.com, 800-845-8001

Inn at Harbour Town

Boutique inn at Harbour Town Golf Links and Sea Pines Racquet Club. www.seapines.com, 888-807-6873

Inn at Palmetto Bluff Resort

Cottages overlooking the May River. www.palmettobluffresort.com, 866-706-6565

Westin Hilton Head Island Resort & Spa

Beachfront in Port Royal Plantation.

www.westin.com/hiltonhead, 888-625-5144

VACATION RENTALS

Beach Properties of Hilton Head

www.beach-property.com, 800-671-5155

Harbour Town Resorts

www.harbourtownresorts.com, 800-541-7375

Hilton Head Rentals and Golf

www.hiltonheadvacation.com, 800-445-8664

The Vacation Company

www.vacationcompany.com, 800-845-7018

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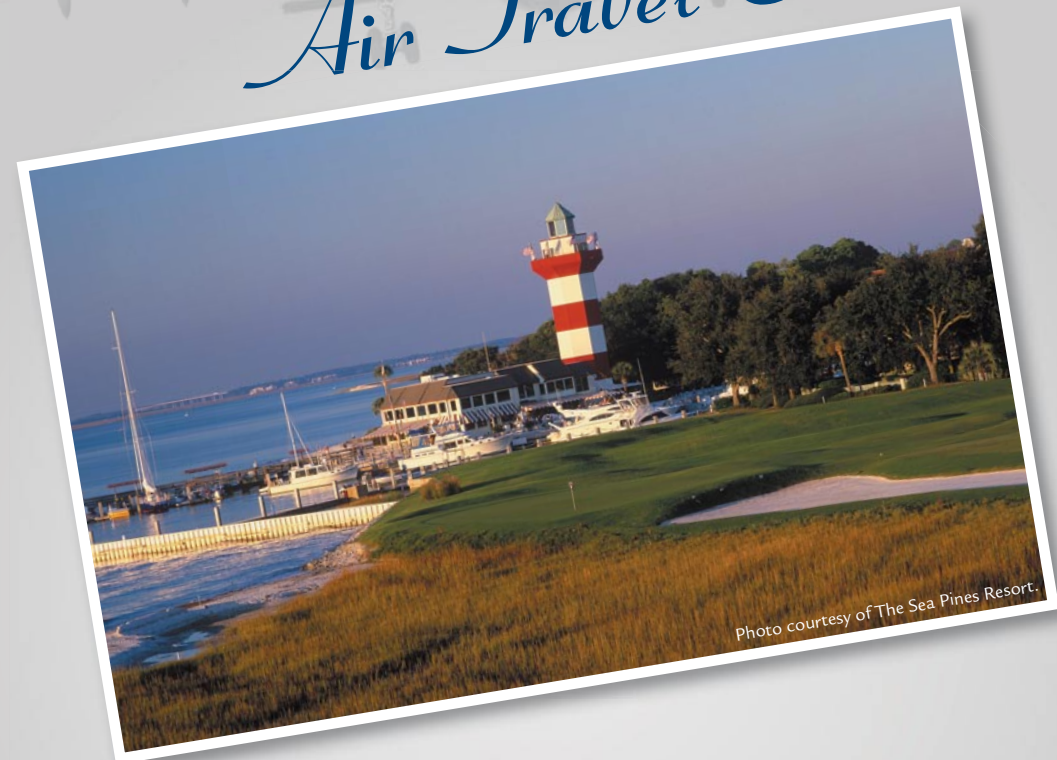


Photo courtesy of The Sea Pines Resort.

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Bluff, run by the award-winning Auberge Resorts, features luxurious private cottages in a breathtaking setting along the May River, along with an impressive array of recreational amenities from golf and tennis to croquet and kayaking.

Hilton Head's impressive array of accommodations also includes some 2,200 timeshare villas, most of them offered by Disney Vacation Club, Spinnaker Resorts and Marriott Vacation Club, which launched the timeshare program on Hilton Head with the Monarch at Sea Pines in 1984.

"We're a very popular location for timeshares," says Susan Thomas, vice president of the Hilton Head Island-Bluffton Chamber of Commerce and Visitor and Convention Bureau. "They make up 10 percent of our overall accommodations."

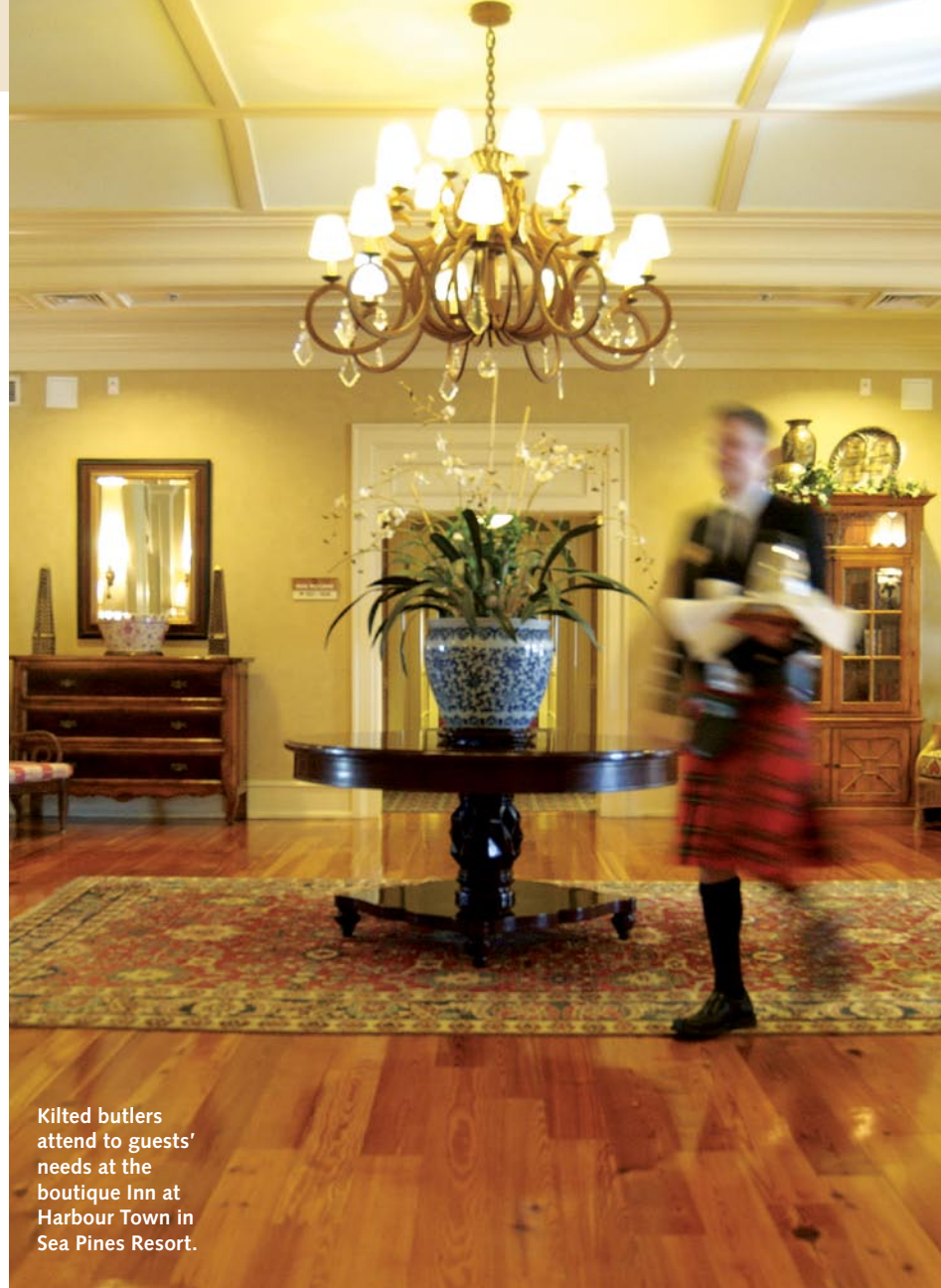
A buyer's market

Once they visit, many vacationers are lured back, year after year, by the natural beauty and laid-back lifestyle of the South Carolina coast. Eventually, visitors often decide to purchase homes in Hilton Head's gated communities or in the burgeoning village of Bluffton, located just over the bridge.

"We see a lot of people who grew up vacationing on Hilton Head Island and relocate here as adults," says Andy Twisdale, past president of the Hilton Head Area Association of Realtors. "It's more than just the beach and golf; it's the quality of life that makes the area so desirable."

It took just one vacation to convince New York actors Kathleen and Jeffrey Watkins to leave successful careers on Broadway for the slower-paced island life.

"We were sitting at the beach thinking how great it would be to live here," remembers Jeffrey Watkins, echoing a story that islanders of every vintage can tell. "By the end of the week, we had put down a deposit on a house."



Kilted butlers attend to guests' needs at the boutique Inn at Harbour Town in Sea Pines Resort.

The island's coveted lifestyle has dramatically increased home values since 2002, although the past year has seen a slight decline in prices and more properties listed, creating a buyer's market. The median price of a house located within 12 rows of the beach is now \$1,795,000. The median price of more inland homes is \$899,000. Carpenters and contractors are busy rehabbing many of these properties, upgrading decades-old homes with appointments such as indoor-outdoor pools, home spas and luxurious marble and tile surfaces.

The mainland, meanwhile, from Bluffton to points north, west

and south, is booming with new construction. Buyers can find a more diverse inventory of residences here with a median price of \$329,500.

Between Bluffton and southern Beaufort County, the master-planned communities of Colleton River, Belfair, Hampton Hall and Berkeley Hall have sprung up, offering luxury homes and townhouses with amenities such as golf courses, shopping and some water frontage.

"There's a market for everyone in the greater Hilton Head area," says Twisdale. "You don't have to live on the beach to enjoy the quality of life this area affords."



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