

"How did you ever find this place?"

By John Wilsterman Photos by Bob Claxton

First time visitors always ask this question when they come to the communities of Harris Neck and Shellman Bluff in North McIntosh County. Newcomers are usually amazed by the unspoiled beauty and wonder how this place has remained hidden from them for so long. And then they are further amazed by the friendly welcome they receive from the folks who have found it.

The faster we zoom down I-95 towards familiar destinations like Savannah, St. Simons and Sea Islands, Cumberland and Jekyll, the more likely it is we'll pass up the hidden gems that can be found between Exits 58 and 67.

For decades, North McIntosh Coun-



Cherry Laurel Dock

ty has been known to a few fishermen, hunters and folks who, needing to get away, have found a quiet place of unspoiled beauty where they can escape their daily grind and slow down enough to take it all in. Where else can you watch the dawn over Barbour Island and the same day see the sunset on the Sapelo River?

These treasures are also well known to a select group of people who have chosen to live here permanently or own get-away homes. Add to that a growing number of enthusiastic day-trippers who are discovering the area.

This paradise can be found a few miles east of I-95 between exits 58 and 67, along US Highway 17, following either Harris Neck or Shellman Bluff Road. The first few miles might give the impression you're forsaking civilization, but you will eventually be reward-

ed with picturesque vistas of salt marsh, creeks, and lagoons and leave no doubt you have arrived on the hidden coast of Georgia.

From exit 67, I-95, turn south onto Hwy 17. You're not even in McIntosh County yet until you cross the South Newport River. The South Newport River, like the Sapelo, the Barbour and Julianton Rivers, is a saltwater estuary, feeding the tidal might of the Atlantic Ocean inland as much as twenty miles. Add to that, hundreds of creeks, pools and miles of grass and you have the Georgia Salt Marsh, as unique an ecosystem as can be found anywhere in the world.

If you want a great place to stop and enjoy the little things, then visit the Smallest Church in America. Recently rebuilt after a fire... for obvious reasons the community solidly rejected an expansion plan. Stick your head inside this cozy chapel and you'll appreciate the adage "Two's company... three's a crowd."

Turn left on Harris Neck Road, a fine country road heading east toward the ocean. You'll get the impression that there is nothing here but forest, fields and the occasional glimpse of salt marsh, but remember, this is the "hidden" coast.



You'll pass Eagle Neck, a development that has its own airport, and Bel-



vedere, a gated community with a marina and equestrian center. You'll see further signs of civilization, a fire station and a few small churches.

As you continue east on Harris Neck, the Georgia salt marsh dominates the scenery.

Crossing over a bridge, you come to the Harris Neck National Wildlife Refuge operated by the US Fish and Wildlife Services.

The Refuge is well known to bird watchers all over the country and is on the Colonial Coast Birding Trail. It contains some of the oldest live oaks anywhere and is the nesting and migration spot for over five hundred species of birds.



Rookery at Harris Neck Wildlife Refuge

(Photo by James Holland)

Continuing east on Harris Neck, you'll encounter the isolated neighborhoods of Springfield, Gould's Landing and Delta Plantation. Gould's Landing is the location of the Barbour River Yacht Club, a private marina on the Barbour River serving the needs of the community and the folks who live on



Barbour Island, the ultimate “getting away from it all” destination, accessible only by a three-mile boat ride or if you have a small plane, you can land on the equally small landing strip.

A little south of Harris Neck is the community of Shellman Bluff, where there’s a bit more infrastructure. Shell-



man Bluff has a long history as a destination for saltwater fishermen. The community hosts several large fishing tournaments each year and provides access from a number of locations on the White Chimney, Boro and Julianton rivers. If you’re more into eating than catching, several great restaurants offer authentic Shellman Bluff ambience, including the iconic Hunter’s Café and Blackbeard’s Cove.

Shellman Bluff’s finest restaurant just



A part of Shellman Bluff’s charm is the dirt road that hugs the waterfront.

might be Speed’s Kitchen, if you’re not in a hurry. Locals will bring a deck of cards and a bottle of wine and swear that it’s worth the wait. But, why are you in such a hurry anyway? It might sound ironical, but Speed’s Kitchen is a little off the beaten track. You can find it just off Sutherland Bluff Drive at the end of Speed’s Kitchen Road.

If you happen to arrive with less than a full kit, there’s a nearby Clyde’s Convenience Store, as well as the new Dollar General. Otherwise, Shellman Bluffers find they can enjoy life sans most big city trappings.

Depending on who you ask for directions, there is a curious three or four way stop sign intersection, right next to the Shellman Bluff Veterans’ Memorial, placed there to honor our military by the late Ron Iler and maintained by Ser-

St. Patrick’s Day at Shellman Bluff is always fun for everyone!



geant Iler’s family.

You might arrive at this intersection during rush hour and actually encounter another vehicle, probably a golf cart, but more likely you’ll have the road to yourself.

If you arrive at Shellman Bluff during



Waterfront at Shellman Bluff

the annual and legendary St. Patrick's Day Parade, count on a massive traffic jam, thousands of happy people from all over the country, a band or two, beads, food, fire trucks, and Shriners... It's a massive, two-mile-long block party that grows bigger every year. The St. Patrick's Day parade is never held on St. Patrick's Day, but usually the Saturday after. So you can attend your favorite other St. Patrick's Day parade and then come to this one and have some real fun.

The parade and many other community events and activities is sponsored by the Friends of Shellman Bluff, a local organization founded to promote and assist police, firemen, and emergency medical service people and to award scholarships to worthy students. Recently the Friends of Shellman Bluff opened the Friends of Shellman Bluff Park, the community service offspring of Gary E. Smith. This multi-use park, opened this year and is still a work-in-progress with planned exercise trails, bandstands and a vendor service area



for community events.

Shellman Bluff is the home to select residential neighborhoods that can ful-



Cooper's Point Clubhouse

fill the desires of people from all walks of life and price ranges. Cooper's Point, Cherry Laurel and Sutherland Bluff Plantation will suit the gated community set and offer picturesque views of the Boro, White Chimney and Sapelo rivers, and surrounding marsh. For the rest of us, check out neighborhoods with nostalgic and romantic names like Pine Harbor, Dallas Bluff, Contentment Bluff, and Pleasure Bluff, where you can find the essence of relaxed and laid-back living.

Now for the biggest surprise of all, Shellman Bluff is the location of the Sapelo Hammock Golf Course, a spectacular 18-hole championship golf course, praised by Golf Georgia Magazine as the Georgia Coast's "Diamond in the Rough." Built in the late 1990's, the Sapelo Hammock GC has been through its share of drama. Several years ago the owner, a local developer, had to close the course due to our country's real estate/financial crisis. The community came together, under the leadership of local resident Mike Hardy, a retired executive. Both locals and folks from all

over the country who had connections to the community pooled resources and capital to save this vital part of the community. Over the last five years, the owner's group has worked diligently to restore the golf course to championship quality.

Today Sapelo Hammock is well on its way to financial vitality and is a cornerstone of the community. The golf course



provides a vital piece of infrastructure that people look for when they make a choice where to visit, where to invest and ultimately where to live. SHGC is more than a golf course to the residents of the Harris Neck and Shellman Bluff communities. In addition to the spectacular golf, SHGC opens its doors to everyone as a meeting place, to hold an event, party, reception, wedding or golf outing. Local artists and authors hold art shows and book signings. The Bluff even has its own band, Slackwater, who has held packed-house concerts in SHGC's clubhouse!

Getting back to our original question: How did you find this place?

The excellence of any community is derived from the quality of the people.





Sapelo Hammock Golf Club

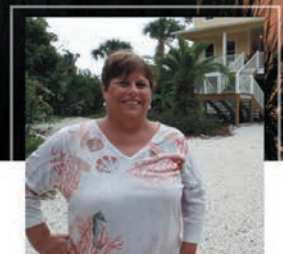


Beautiful coastal scenery abounds at Sapelo Hammock Golf Club



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Jan Chamberlain, Blue Heron Inn



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Marcia and Michael
Hardy

Interesting and diverse people from all over the country, and even a few who have international origins, have had the good fortune to not only find this paradise on earth, but have invested here with permanent or second homes.

Marcia and Michael Hardy tell their story. Michael had been in the pharmaceutical business for 35 years and had lived all over the country, including Florida and South Carolina. They wanted to live on the coast, but not in a high density community. While at a meeting, they asked the question, "Where is a hidden treasure on the Georgia coast?" The answer: "Look at McIntosh County, Georgia."

Michael described their discovery. "We came here. Fell in love with the place... Shellman Bluff. We didn't know a soul. We moved here because of the beauty. The natural beauty just captured us. But, what really makes this place special is the people. Here, there is a diversity of personalities and backgrounds. It is very unique."

Marcia related that the best part of traveling is coming home. "The min-

ute you pull back in, you can breathe." Michael added, "There is no place that I want to go. I'm up at daybreak with my lab, Charlie, thinking, 'God, thank you!' How special is this place! I see it every day and look out there at the marsh, and then we are with our friends here, who are so special."

Laura and Jordy Evans tell their story about making North McIntosh County their home. Laura relates, "We were very careful about choosing a place to retire. We had the opportunity to retire early and thought about where we wanted to go. So, we made lists about what we wanted in a retirement place. We wanted water, trees, nature. We came here and rented several houses before we built. I looked for places I could volunteer. Now I am working with after-school tutoring, youth groups, Morgan's Chapel after-school, art camp at the Old Jail... The longer I am here, the more opportunities I find. There is so much to do, but I try to sit on the porch every day."

Jordy pointed out a rarity about McIn-



Laura and Jordy Evans

tosh County. "It's pretty rare for you to go across this nation and find a county that doesn't have a single traffic light. That brings us back to what got us here in the first place—the lack of congestion. I do not like traffic. Here it is, the sound of silence."

It's just not the absence of congestion, but there is an absence of pollution, Jordy pointed out. Take for instance the Sapelo Island National Estuarine Sanctuary, which is an unspoiled ecosystem that is used as a baseline for measuring



Slackwater Band is composed of a band of transplants to McIntosh County.



other places.

Jordy noted, “One of the strengths in this county is its diversity of people. And there is one commonality I have found all across the county and that is people here know how to make their own fun. It doesn’t take much in an environment like this. Whether sitting under the live oak tree on the corner or getting together with a few people at the dock for a fish fry, or forming a band. (Author’s note: Jordy is the harmonica player for the band, Slackwater.) The attitude here is a can-do spirit of making our own fun. And, if you like the outdoor sports, this is like heaven here. You don’t have to go far to deer hunt, duck hunt, turkey hunt. We are just a 20-minute boat ride from an uninhabited barrier island. Who else gets to do that?”

For other lucky folks who have found this place, the reasons they keep coming back or have moved here permanently are as diverse as the people themselves. Some have been coming here for years. This is where their families came. Some are drawn here for the fishing. Many think this is the best year-round fishing on the Georgia Coast. They are all amazed by the beautiful, unspoiled natural element, the views of the rivers, creeks, lagoons and marsh, the spectacular wildlife, dawns and sunsets. The quiet, sometimes lazy life you can enjoy or the excitement of the sporting opportunities provides an irresistible invitation to return and stay longer next time.

If you find yourself missing the traffic, car horns and sirens, the bustle of crowds, the outlet malls and you just can’t seem to make your own coffee, we understand. The streets and malls of Savannah or St. Simons are less than an hour away.



There have been a lot of people saying that about Sapelo Hammock Golf Club recently. Come see for yourself why they are saying it is so Special

Sapelo Hammock Golf Club
Host Site 2013-2014 NGA Pro Tour
NeSmith Chevrolet Classic



(Photo by Laura Evans)

John Wilsterman, former big-city dweller, is a retired IBM Executive and author of novels, "Beneath Juliette" and "Next

to Life Itself." He is a resident of Sutherland Bluff Plantation, in the heart of the Shellman Bluff Community, and a member of the band, Slackwater.

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