



St. Simons Island Lighthouse Museum

THE FOREVER ISLAND

Off the southern coast of Georgia sits an island with deep family roots — and an infectious allure vacationers can't resist

Story by Patricia Letakis

Doesn't anybody stay in one place anymore are lyrics from Carole King's 1971 song "So Far Away." And in 2017 that message still rings true. So when I meet someone who can proudly say that his family is fifth generation, living on a fairly small Georgia island for close to two centuries, well, I'm truly impressed. There's got to be something very special about that particular island to keep a family grounded there, when so many people are uprooting and even moving across the country for a better job or lifestyle.

However, packing up and leaving hasn't crossed the minds of Cap Fendig and his family, who he says "have been standing or lying on St. Simons Island since the mid-1800s." One of the four Golden Isles off the southern coast of Georgia, the 18-mile-long island is home sweet home for the Fendig clan — as well as repeat vacationers who have discovered it.

With his Southern drawl and boyish smile, Fendig is greeting guests as they board his old-fashioned trolley for a tour of St. Simons. The car, explains the owner of Lighthouse Trolleys tour company, was

designed to resemble the original ones used in the early 1900s to transport residents from their summer cottages to the beach. "We copied them," he admits, with a twinkle in his eye.

As we travel St. Simons' main north-south thoroughfare, named Frederica Road, Fendig turns into a tiny neighborhood so we can take a look at the remaining historic cottages, constructed of wood and topped with tin roofs. When the causeway connecting St. Simons with the mainland was built in 1924, the island became a coveted vacation spot for South Georgians. From

Photo: courtesy of GoldenIsles.com

Photos: courtesy of Georgia Department of Economic Development

"WE STARTED COMING HERE WHEN OUR CHILDREN WERE SMALL. AND NOW WE COME EVERY YEAR."

— DIANE WYSONG

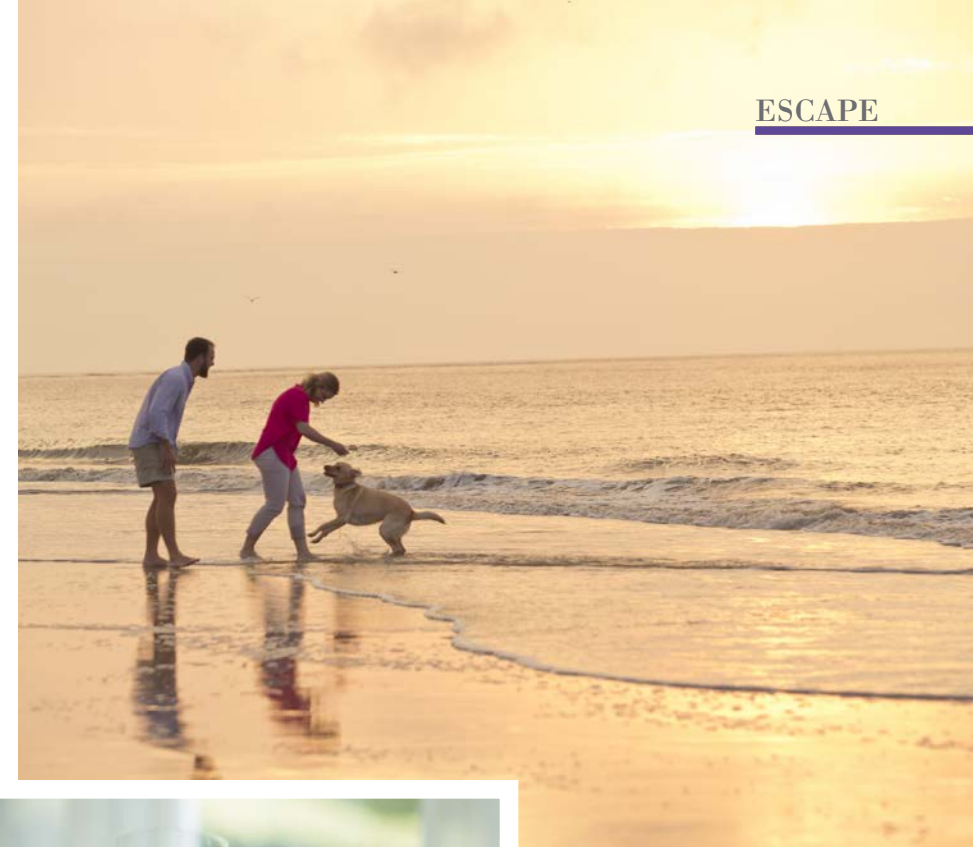
1928 to 1932 cottages with big porches, latticework and picket fences were built under the shade of oak trees. Today these bungalows have been renovated and restored, and the now-huge and ubiquitous granddaddy oaks have been designated a protected signature of St. Simons.

Adding to the island's appeal is The King and Prince Beach & Golf Resort, another historic gem. It was built as a private club in 1935 and designed with a Mediterranean style. After World War II, the oceanfront property was expanded and converted into a hotel, and from 1947 and throughout the resort-era heyday of the 1950s and '60s, it was *the* place to vacation. Considered a major player in the allure and mystic of St. Simons, it sits proudly on the shores of the Atlantic.

Further exploring takes us to the southwest tip of the island and Pier Village, a quaint commercial stretch of indie shops and restaurants that is a favorite for fellow sightseers Jack and Diane Wysong of Centerville, Ohio. Annual visitors to St. Simons, the couple tell me how they enjoy walking out to the pier that juts into the St. Simons Sound and meandering Mallery Street, where you can pop into stores like Dutchmans, a home furnishings emporium brimming with a blend of island- and country-inspired merchandise, or grab a Southern-style breakfast of biscuits and gravy with the locals at the 27-year-old Sandcastle Café.

"We started coming here when our children were small. And now we come every year," says Diane. Besides strolling Pier Village, she adds, "We've done a lot of bike riding on the island. You can actually bike the entire island, about 12 miles [on paths]."

Another stop on the trolley tour, and one that's popular with bicyclists, is the St. Simons Island Lighthouse Museum, just east of the village. The ambitious can make the 129-step climb to the top of the tower for a panoramic view. Although the



From top: St. Simons Island boasts wide dog-friendly beaches at low tide; seasonal salads are a staple on the menu at Echo restaurant; shoppers delight in the sea-inspired home furnishings found at Dutchmans.



In summer, St. Simons is a popular family destination.



existing structures — a stark-white tower and redbrick keeper's dwelling — were built in 1872, the history behind the lighthouse is fascinating.

At the beginning of the Civil War in 1861, the local Glynn Guards Infantry Company blew up the lighthouse to keep it out of the hands of the Union Navy. However, the Fresnel lens was dismantled and removed — supposedly hidden on the mainland — prior to the tower's destruction. When Federal troops arrived, they searched for the lens to no avail. Sadly it has never been found.

After sightseeing I'm dropped off at my home base for the weekend, The King and Prince resort. Lucky for me I'm staying in a cabana room in the historic main building, where I can step out of my front door and be right on the edge of the beach where its hard-packed sands are ideal for power walking. (Modern day building codes don't allow construction so close to the shore.)

Adirondack chairs and swings are positioned on the lawn — perfect perches for sipping a coffee at sunrise or toasting the end of the day with a cocktail.

From 1980 to 2014, the property has been continuously upgraded. Several two- and three-story buildings, many with ocean views; rental beach houses; dog-friendly units; a pool complex; and the Echo restaurant have been added.

My evening dinner is at Echo, named so in a nod to the Naval radar station that was set up on the property during WWII. Vintage photos at the entrance document the sailors and technicians who ran it.

At the helm is chef James Flack. Just like Fendig, he has strong ties to the area too. As a youngster he spent time on neighboring Jekyll Island, the Golden Isle where millionaire families from the early 20th century — think Morgans, Rockefellers and Vanderbilts — had vacationed. Later as an adult he worked as a chef at the elite

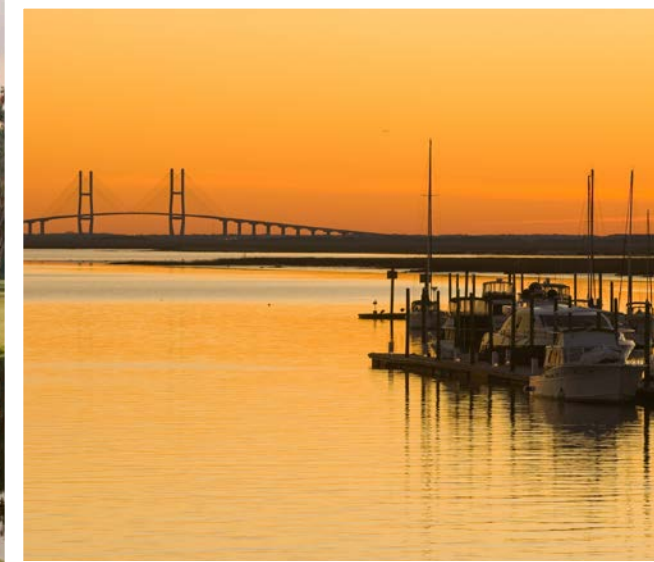


Beers from the South's craft breweries are served at Echo.

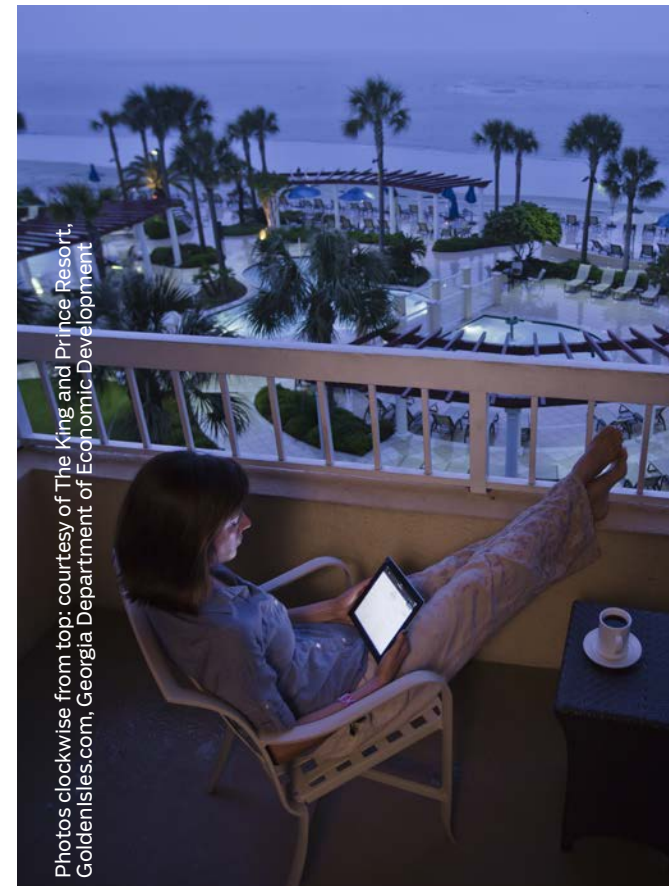


Wake up and go to sleep to the sound of the Atlantic Ocean's waves at the King and Prince.

Photos: The King and Prince Resort



Clockwise from top left: The King and Prince Golf Course is built on what was once a plantation; Morningstar Marina rents dock boats for exploring the river system; the King and Prince pool complex.



Photos clockwise from top: courtesy of The King and Prince Resort; GoldenIsles.com; Georgia Department of Economic Development

Cloister at Sea Island. Another Golden Isle, Sea Island sits just east of St. Simons. In 2004, President George W. Bush hosted the G8 Summit on this private island.

For Flack, St. Simons is a good fit and the region's seafood offerings a reason to stay and cook. "Among my favorites are black grouper, blue crabs and wild Georgia shrimp. The sweet grass [in surrounding coastal marshlands] that the shrimp live in and eat causes them to taste sweeter than other varieties of shrimp," he elaborates.

One of my last stops on the island is the King and Prince Golf Course where I meet more longtime lovers of St. Simons. Rick Mattox and his wife Charmaine have been working together at the golf club for 28 years. As director of golf Mattox worked alongside Lee Jones as he designed the course in 1989. Charmaine runs the pro shop and on occasion bakes her wildly famous Hawaiian cake (a secret recipe) for deserving golfers.

For Rick, the St. Simons course is special because of holes 12, 13, 14 and 15. "Nowadays, as you know, you can't get near the wetland marshes," he says about these island holes.

And nowadays, you can't always stay in one place anymore, but these St. Simons folks have managed to do so — and love it. ☞