

Far from reality — near perfection

Eagle Island is convenient to the First Coast but feels worlds away.



Provided by Leigh Cort

Leigh Cort
Columnist

“In the attitude of silence the soul finds the path in a clearer light, and what is elusive and deceptive resolves itself into crystal clearness.”

—Mahatma Gandhi

Traveling to a private island seemed an elusive mystery to me until I visited Eagle Island, a 10-acre back barrier isle on the Georgia coast that took me from reality to seclusion within minutes from the interstate. Anticipating Captain Andy Hill’s beautiful hand-crafted Eagle Lodge, that he designed and



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built 10 years ago, and the promise of being personally escorted by boat with friends to paradise, our planning days flew by. Six best friends left home with small suitcases of personal amenities and clothes, and large coolers of culinary

ingredients, fine wine and spirits of adventure. If we were going to spend a long weekend cooking together in the outdoor gourmet kitchen under the stars, we would need more herbs, fish and favorite specialty foods than shorts, tees or tiaras!

Gateway to Darien

When you prepare to be a guest on Eagle Island, Captain Andy carefully walks you through the details of where

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Here you can see the Darien River in the background and May Hall Creek in the foreground. Eagle Island is private with very secluded property around Eagle Lodge and an easy to navigate dock.

he's going to meet you on the mainland of Darien, Ga. This little hamlet has a marvelous history in the cotton, rice and lumber industries during the 19th century. We can almost hear the booming voices from the 1830s as the town peaked with exports of baled cotton, exceeded only by the ports of Savannah and Charleston. The Darien waterfront was crowded with ships awaiting their precious cargoes of pine timber being rafted down the pulsating Altamaha River. Captain Andy's collection of private back-barrier islands are in the center of an ecosystem that has been the gateway to Darien for hundreds of years.

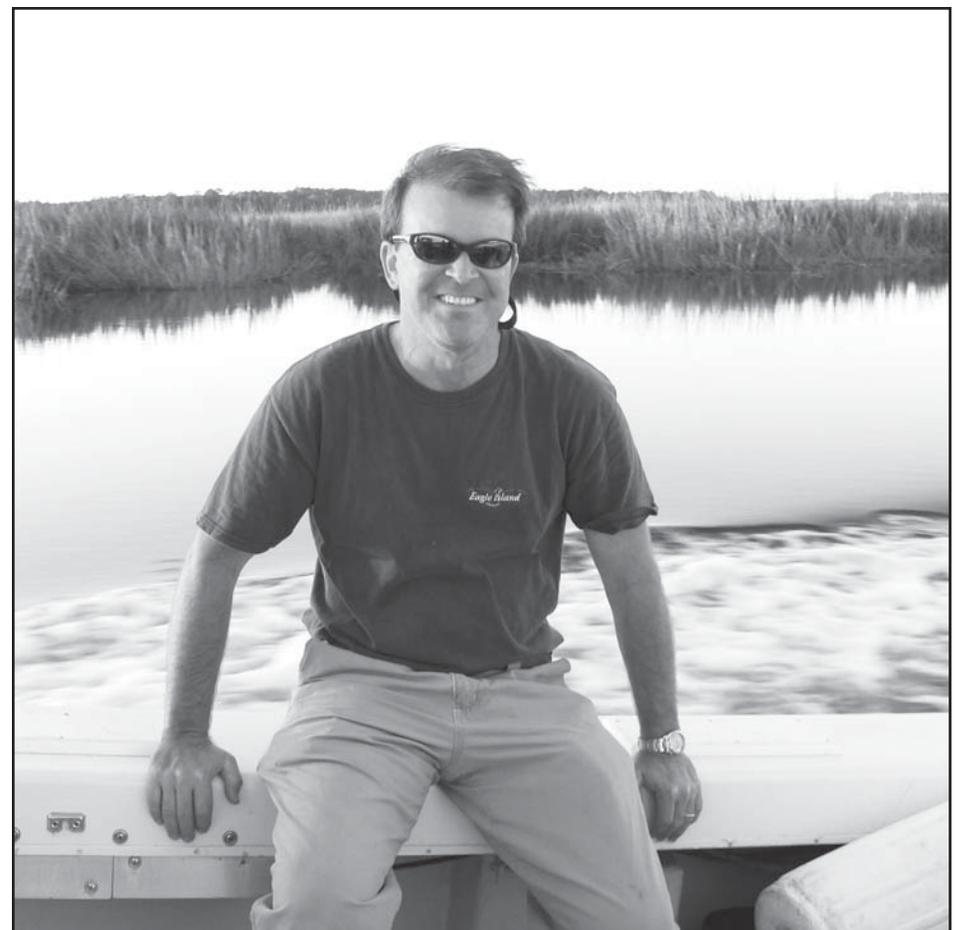
It's hard to believe that Darien was once the leading center of export for lumber on the southern Atlantic coast. Tiny Darien became an international port as ships from Europe, Asia and South America frequented the local waterways to load lumber. Historic accounts tell the story about its crest in the very early 1900s when more than 100 million linear board feet of timber and lumber were being shipped. Once the development of railroads in Georgia bypassed Darien, this great port disappeared.

As McIntosh County also rivaled

the world for oyster harvesting during this era, the decline was equally devastating due to overharvesting. But a new commercial fishery developed: shrimping. By the early 1960s, Darien had the largest shrimping fleet on the Georgia coast. Wild Georgia shrimp are still plentiful and considered to be the ultimate to eat. Handsome blue crabs share the spotlight and are captured daily in the crab traps that Captain Andy has baited and ready for arriving guests. These are two of the most delectable reasons to spend a vacation on Eagle Island. Shellfish connoisseurs readily appreciate the fresh sweet flavors and oh, the days of fun on Eagle dock under the island sun!

Cruising to Eagle Island

Captain Andy's boats wait quietly at the Darien dock until he and his team load them with our supplies and a bushel of stories. We were ready to leave our lives behind for just a brief time. The breezes blew through my mind as we watched the parade of shrimp boats disappear in the distance. I couldn't see another soul as we motored past a sentinel of shrimp



Captain Andy Hill

Craig Myers/Provided by Leigh Cort

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boats but I could imagine their past. We were heading east into the future and toward Captain Andy's collection of private islands.

For 10 years, guests to Eagle Lodge have understood what it's like to unwind without looking at a watch or Day-Timer. This took us a few hours but eventually "island time" began to settle into everyone's tempo. Time passed slowly on the island as the morning unfolded to the rhythm of nature. We didn't feel the frenzy of having to create a plan of activities; whatever we chose became a passion of the moment. From listening to birds waking with the sunrise each day to the lapping of water against Eagle dock, the smallest sounds became a special moment to savor. We spotted a playful raccoon climbing a palm frond then hopping into a kayak on Eagle dock and everyone held their breath when a bald eagle swooped gracefully out of his nest. And it was still morning.

Anything is possible on Eagle Island

After arriving at the island dock, Captain Andy and his crew took our bags to the lodge while we felt our cares drifting toward the enormous open sky. We slowly walked the oyster shell path leading to a private retreat that's "a little bit rustic – a lot of luxury." Eagle Lodge can easily sleep 12-14 people, but for three couples, it was perfect with two private bedrooms and an upstairs loft bedroom. Shared baths were fine, and the outdoor shower tucked under the stairs was a marvelous romantic touch! From fine furnishings, luxurious linens and spa-style bath to a well-stocked gourmet kitchen and amenities to make our stay unforgettable, getting settled in the lodge took us a few moments before we began preparing a picnic lunch that we enjoyed while fishing and crabbing on the dock.

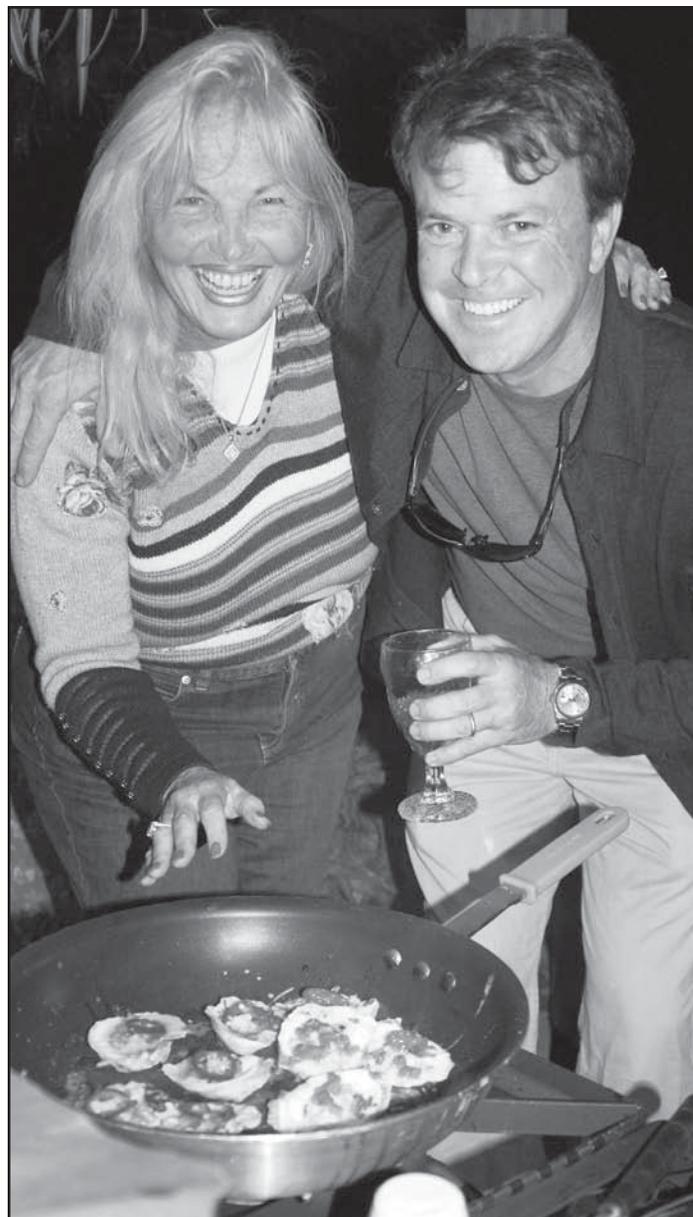
This vacation encouraged flexing our culinary muscles since there wasn't a chef to feed us. Groceries and beverages were our personal choice with optional Southern Georgia seafood, barbecue and regional specialties that were meticulously arranged by Captain Andy. We chose to plan our meals around everyone's individual culinary talents and loved putting our vacation groceries away in the lodge's spacious full kitchen with lots of utensils, pots and pans, and everything one could need without having access to the mainland.

If you've never sat by a bonfire on a brisk spring night, this was the perfect setting. Captain Andy had thought of everything — even setting the kindling and first stack of wood inside a



Kayaking from the Eagle Island dock

Photos provided by Leigh Cort



Checking out the 'Private Islands of Georgia' recipe for succulent, fresh coastal oysters



Even raccoons enjoy a bit of rest and relaxation on Eagle dock. Photo courtesy of Hookey Hamilton

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Cruising along the Darien shrimp dock into the Darien River toward Eagle Island

Unbound Travels

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massive brick fire pit that only needed a match to ignite. The ensuing hours of mesmerizing fire light and sparks

ascending into the night air were ripe for relaxing conversation and fun. We nearly kept the fire blazing until dawn and we didn't want to leave the fire pit without one last s'more.

What could lure friends from their down-comfortered beds quicker than the aroma of coffee in the chilly morning? One of the fellas prepared a hearty breakfast, amateur and serious photographers disappeared into the island with armloads of camera equipment. It was a perfect day to dig into the deep freezer for Captain Andy's stash of frozen shrimp and fish used to bait hooks and crab traps.

Each day on Eagle Island is whatever you want to make it. It's invigorating and teeming with eco options, whatever the season. We took a leisurely walk through the woods to the southern tip and found a hammock under the tall pines. One couple stayed on the porch with books about the Georgia marshes and history of the Guale Indians while relaxing in the massive swing within view of the horseshoe pit, pond and hot tub. On Eagle Island, napping is permissible any time of the day so that when you re-enter civilization, you know that you've let your tensions lapse.

Boating adventures

Eagle Island has a superb collection of kayaks for adventuring off the dock

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into the pristine coastal waters. Watching the tide charts each day became routine over breakfast so that we could comfortably set out with a reasonable time to return. The island's kayaks are light enough for two women to put into the water and enjoy the afternoon.

Many guests cruise to Eagle Island in their own boats. Consider a day trip to Sapelo Island, the fourth largest of Georgia's chain of barrier islands. Although one of Georgia's secrets, Captain Andy personally introduced us to Nanny Goat Beach, one of the surprises for guests of Eagle Island, an exclusive invitation to explore a beach with nobody in sight for miles. Renting his boat for a day, we packed a picnic, took a refreshing ocean swim, gathered buckets of whelk shells and watched the ever changing primary and secondary dunes that are home to sea turtles, sandpipers, white pelicans and plovers.

Back at the lodge, it was anyone's guess about whose turn it was to prepare dinner. It just might be that the prior evening's Team A was stepping into the hot tub while Team B listened to music, lit candles, sipped wine and whipped up a low country boil with local shrimp, crab, potatoes, onions, corn on the cob and sausage. It's a snap to make in one huge pot, which, once again, Andy has provided for no-stress cooking. Oysters are plentiful so we ordered a bushel from Captain

Andy for us to roast and prepare "private islands of Georgia" style topped with crumbled bacon, cheese, scallions, lemon and jalapenos. YUM!

Each night we sat by the Lodge's brick fireplace discussing how Eagle Island could touch everyone's heart:

- A lone visitor could become tuned to the quiet while painting or photographic a vibrant landscape of marsh and sky.
- A couple in love could share the sweetest hour building a fire or relaxing on a porch swing.
- A family could connect again with no intrusions as they toast a celebration.
- A group of friends could make anything happen together as they laugh at each other's culinary wizardry.

Or one could do absolutely nothing. Watch the clouds roll by. Inhale the magnificent coastal breezes. Hear a tree's leaves rustle. Think about life's joys and beauty. Start a conversation. Listen to someone's personal thoughts and dreams.

We all fell under the spell of Eagle Island — admitting that "island time" was now our time and everything else could wait. We knew morning would come quickly with another perfect day to sit and watch the stately moss-draped oaks or the tidal creek opening its welcoming arms toward the Atlantic Ocean.



Eagle Lodge in the late afternoon sun

Craig Myers/Provided by Leigh Cort

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