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SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2008

Living on TYBEE TIME

BY DEBORAH HUSO
 Special to the Observer

TYBEE ISLAND, Ga. — This laid-back island just east of Savannah offers the chance to kick back, turn off the cell phone and spend a week in your flip-flops. It's certainly not Jekyll Island or St. Simons.

There are no luxury hotels, pristine golf courses or high-class gourmet dining options. But there is a funky, hole-in-the wall restaurant called A.J.'s with rustic seating on the dock overlooking Back Creek, where you can watch dolphins play while enjoying crab cakes or yellow fin tuna. And there are rental cottages painted in royal blue, neon green and bright pink that you can rent for a week or a month and live like a native, wearing a bikini to walk the dog. Tybee is a throwback to the 1950s — home to only 3,500 residents, and wonderfully offbeat and undiscovered by the jet set. Just 20 minutes from Savannah and seemingly worlds away from the fast pace of modern life, this little island is the perfect getaway for doing absolutely nothing.



STEPHEN MORTON - ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTO

The Tybee Island, Ga., lighthouse and restored lighthouse keeper's cottage (right) are part of coastal Georgia's tourist attractions.

Beach walking, biking, and kayaking

The best part about Tybee is its barrier island beaches, which are wide and beige. They're littered with tiny shells and wooden swings positioned strategically along the way, where you can cozy up with a mixed drink from the bar at the beach pavilion. A haven for dolphins, Tybee's beaches are great viewing spots for these marine mammals. Local outfitters also offer boat tours around the barrier island with promises of dolphin sightings and water views of the Old Cockspur Lighthouse as well as nearby Fort Pulaski.



TYBEE TOURISM COUNCIL PHOTO

At Tybee Island, you might just encounter a playful Atlantic dolphin.

Another fun way to see Tybee is by bicycle. They're available for rent all over the island, and the best place for a leisurely ride is along Tybee's abandoned railroad bed, which once carried Savannah's elite to weekend cottages on the island. Known today as the Old Railroad Trail, this six-mile path leads through scenic marshland to nearby Old Fort Jackson, a crucial part of the defense of the Savannah River during the Civil War.

Kayaking is another popular way for getting around and the best way to see the Little Tybee Nature Preserve and the island's hidden inlets, rich with egrets, blue herons and ibis. Guided tours as well as kayak rentals are available from various outfitters on Tybee.

Sleep like a native

The best way to stay on Tybee is in one of its unusual renovated fishing cottages, perhaps one of designer Jane Coslick's rescued fishing-camp shacks. All of them are quaint and comfortable with sweetly sloping floors, decorated in beach brights, and filled with pillows, open windows with billowing white curtains and lazy hammocks on screened porches.

Most cottage rentals and even B&Bs come with bicycles for free by lodgers, and since the island is just under three miles long, there's really no need to use a car at all. Traveling by bike or on foot in flip-flops is just fine for getting around to the beach, the handful of eclectic restaurants and ice cream shops.

Meeting and mingling with the locals

One of the most charming things about Tybee is its friendly residents — some quirky, all incredibly relaxed. Artists and writers have flocked to this laid-back island, and some of their studios and galleries are open to the public. You might even catch a glimpse of Tybee's most famous resident — movie star Sandra Bullock, who owns a house on the island's north end.

Tybee has a rousing nightlife for such a little place. Jokingly referred to as "a drinking island with a fishing problem," Tybee allows alcohol on its beaches and streets (for those who want to escape the local bar scene) as long as it's in a plastic cup. Dining here ranges from super-casual dockside eating on picnic benches at A.J.'s (where dolphins play only a few feet from you) to the more elegant Hunter House Inn with delectable specials such as seafood bisque.



TYBEE TOURISM COUNCIL PHOTO

Artists have flocked to this laid-back island, which has festivals throughout the year.

GET THERE

From Charlotte, take Interstate 77 South to Columbia, then Interstate 26 East to Interstate 95. Take I-95 South to metro Savannah; take Ga. 21 east, through downtown Savannah (renamed Bay Street, then Gen. McIntosh Boulevard); continue east on President Street/Island Expressway; follow U.S. 80 East to Tybee Island. The drive is about 273 miles (4 1/2 hours), one way.

STAY THERE: COTTAGES

Mermaid Cottages. Flip Flop Cottage. Sleeps 9 (3 bedrooms, 1 1/2 baths). \$160 per night. Surf Puppy. Sleeps 4 (1 bedroom, 1 bath). \$150 per night. Details: 912-313-0784; www.mermaidcottages.com
99 Steps from the Beach. Sleeps 5 (2 bedrooms, 1 1/2 baths). Contact for rates: 912-354-8602; www.janecoslickcottages.com
STAY THERE: B & B
Savannah Beach Inn, 21 Officers Row. This is the only B & B right on the beach. Details: 800-844-1398; www.savannahbeachinn.com

STAY THERE: OTHER OPTIONS

Details on a wide range of accommodations on Tybee: www.tybeevisit.com/stay.php.

DINE THERE

There are more than a dozen restaurants on Tybee. Details: www.tybeevisit.com/eat.php
Hunter House Inn, 1701 Butler Ave. Details: 912-786-7515; www.hunterhouseinn.com.
A.J.'s Dockside Restaurant, 1315 Chatham Ave. Details: 912-786-9533; www.ajsdocksidetybee.com.

More on Tybee, Page 6.



STEPHEN MORTON - ASSOCIATED PRESS PHOTO

A surfer carries his board under the pier in Tybee Island, Ga., before going out to catch some waves.

Tybee Time

UPCOMING EVENTS

Thursday: Tie the Knot on Tybee 2. Group wedding, vow renewal, food, drinks and more at 7 p.m. at the Tybee Pier and Pavilion.

Details:
www.tietheknotontybee.com

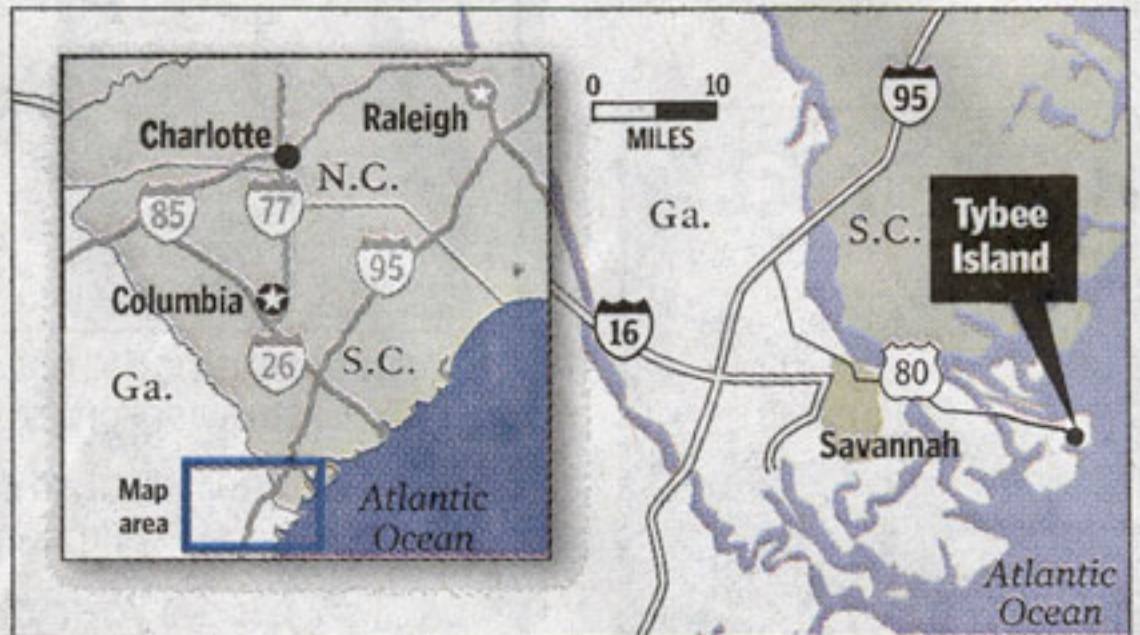
March 8: Tybee St. Patrick's Parade

April 21: Tour de Georgia. Cross-state, 650 bike race for professional racers begins at Tybee, one of six official host cities. Event is on the USA Professional Cycling Tour and considered a warm-up for the international Tour de France competition.

May 10: Spring Arts & Crafts Show. More than 30 artists, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. in Memorial Park.

RESOURCES

Savannah Area Convention & Visitors Bureau: 766-728-2662; www.visitsavannah.com
Tybee Island info: 912-786-5444 ; www.tybeevisit.com



STAFF MAP

CLOSE TO TYBEE

Do pay a call on the city known for 'Good and Evil'

Savannah is chock-full of intriguing historical squares and buildings

Only a 20-minute drive west of Tybee is historic Savannah, immortalized in the book and film "Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil." True to life as the book, Savannah is a city of stunning architecture, live oaks draped in silvery Spanish moss, bumpy brick streets, and 21 beautifully landscaped squares and parks.

The city's Landmark Historic District is 2½ square miles. There is almost too much for the eye to take in. Behind scrolling iron gates that bar entrance to private courtyards, you'll spy houses in colors ranging from rusty orange to pink; you'll see hipped roofs, Doric columns, hidden alcove entrances, curling iron staircases and ornate street lamps.

Must-see landmarks include 30-acre Forsyth Park with its oft-photographed cast-iron fountain (modeled on the fountain at the Place de la Concorde, in Paris), the Gothic façade of the Cathedral of St. John and the eerie statuary of the Colonial Park Cemetery.

Among the historic houses you can tour is the Owens-Thomas House, off Oglethorpe Square. Designed by English architect William Jay in 1816, the home is one of the premier examples of Regency architecture



GEORGIA DEPARTMENT OF ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT PHOTO

People enjoy the walk along River Street on the waterfront in Savannah, Ga.

in America; it has a brass-inlaid staircase and faux dome ceilings.

One of the livelier sections of Savannah is City Market, with dozens of shops and artists' studios, and blues and jazz emanating from balcony bars and street-side clubs.

Much of the city's night scene occurs along Factor's Walk and River Street. Once the cotton warehouse district of Savannah, this riverfront section is now a robust and noisy shopping/eating area. Its old stone and brick warehouses hold restaurants, candy shops, and novelty stores; the upper floors hold chic apartments and hotel rooms.—DEBORAH HUSO

O'Savannah

Savannah is famous for its St. Patrick's Day celebration, which is one of the largest in the nation. Be aware that this year, the event - including its parade - will be Friday, March 14, three days early.

The reason: Easter Sunday is March 23 in 2008, and by long-standing tradition, St. Pat's Day should not be celebrated during Holy Week.

River Street festivities will be March 13-16; City Market festivities are scheduled for March 14-15.

Details:
www.savannahvisit.com.

SAVANNAH INFO

877-728-2662; www.savannahvisit.com.