



SOUTHERN BELLE

Brian Viner visits Palmetto Bluff in South Carolina and discovers a course to rival America's finest

For those crossing the Atlantic in search of sun-kissed winter golf, Florida has always been the favoured destination. Yet there is finer Southern hospitality, and golf every bit as good, a little further north, in South Carolina. And I don't just mean the celebrated islands of Hilton Head and Kiawah: the May River course at the huge Palmetto Bluff resort in South Carolina's spectacular coastal flatlands was built just four years ago and already counts as one of the South's hidden gems.

May River is a Jack Nicklaus signature course, doubtless influenced by his beloved St Andrews' Old Course, with plenty of little round bunkers as fairway targets.

Nicklaus has become one of the keenest exponents of the new trend in golf course construction, that of moving as little dirt as possible. It used to be the other way round. Course designers, to justify their extravagant fees and wanting, quite literally, to leave their mark on the landscape, would send in battalions of diggers. But Nicklaus believes that golf courses should live in complete harmony with their surroundings, and May River, which winds through a forest of palmettos, loblolly pines, and live oaks elegantly draped with Spanish moss, perfectly embodies this philosophy.

Nature, however, also comes with teeth. On the par-4 third hole, having pushed my

drive perilously close to a natural lagoon, I found my ball 4m from six baby alligators, basking in the sun, with momma nearby keeping a lazy eye on me. Later, as I waded into the scrub to the right of the 10th fairway, again in search of an errant drive, my playing partner Kevin calmly recommended that I take care. "Black racers," he said, adding: "Snakes," in case I hadn't quite understood.

Nonetheless, the chance of being savaged by wildlife on May River is considerably less than the chance of being savaged by the course itself. As on all Nicklaus creations, good positional play is rewarded, but stray off the tee even a few times and it's a card-wrecker. On the other hand, there is added joy for European golfers in keeping the ball on the fairway, simply because the quickly regenerating paspalum grass never yields anything other than a perfect lie, bliss for those of us who spend winters in northern Europe finding our balls half-buried in mud.

Kevin and I took the obligatory fore caddie, who runs ahead to locate your shot, wayward or otherwise, and offers lines on greens. I had never come across a fore caddie before but it was a nice luxury. Of course, luxury comes at a price. But for that price you get to play one of the finest courses south of the Mason-Dixon line. And afterwards you can sit in the immaculate clubhouse sipping a mint julep, reflecting on what might have been if only you hadn't snap-hooked off the 16th tee. ● EB

NEED TO KNOW BEFORE YOU GO



Green fees: \$260 (€195) including caddie
Playing information: The course is restricted to members, and guests staying at The Inn at Palmetto Bluff.

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Further information: Cottages at The Inn at Palmetto Bluff, beautifully situated around the 8,000ha estate, start at \$500 (€370) per property per night.

Getting there: Brian was a guest of Virgin Upper Class from London Heathrow to Washington Dulles. Other carriers fly directly from Europe to Charlotte, North Carolina, a two-hour drive away. The nearest airport is Savannah, Georgia, which connects to most large US airports.