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Travel

Happy

Eager to mark a special occasion, **Ed Victor** heads to America's little-known Lowcountry – and is swept away by its classy Southern charm

FINDING a special place to celebrate a special anniversary is not easy, so I racked my travel brains and books to come up with something suitable. Geography played a role in the choice: I had to be in New York on business at the beginning of June, but there are plenty of beautiful places on America's East Coast.

New England is gorgeous in June and Florida was a possibility – but we decided to head for the less well-known Lowcountry, a lovely chunk of coastline that includes two well preserved cities of the Old South: Charleston in South Carolina and Savannah, Georgia.

My wife Carol and I wanted to experience both the urban and the rural aspects of Lowcountry life, so we decided to visit Savannah and then The Inn at Palmetto Bluff, a resort built on a 20,000-acre sea island at the headwaters of the beautiful May river.

This was my first visit to a city I knew only from the fascinating John Berendt bestseller *Midnight In The Garden Of Good And Evil* and from the great Ella Fitzgerald song *Hard Hearted Hannah* – 'the vamp of Savannah, GA'.

Berendt's novel is a heady mixture of Southern charm and dark murder mystery in an exotic and eccentric setting. The evocation of this sultry, steamy and strange place set off a virtual storm of tourism – it truly was a book that changed a city. I felt sure the reality couldn't possibly live up to the author's artful descriptions. I was wrong.

Savannah was founded in 1733 by the British General James Edward Oglethorpe. America's first planned city, it was laid out in a series of grids with 24 large and beautiful public squares – of which 21 are still preserved within the two-and-a-half square-mile Landmark Historic District. One of the finest, Monterey Square, is where the Mercer House, featured in the Berendt novel, still stands and is a magnet for tourists. Tours of the house are available and bring the book vividly to life.

We navigated the various squares both on foot and by horse-drawn carriage – a lovely way to take in the architectural glories of a city that is, quite simply, a visual delight. Apart from the impressive buildings, many decorated with the cast-iron fences, balconies and stair railings that are unique to Savannah, it is also full of ancient and beautiful trees hung with Spanish moss.

Our hotel, the Mansion on Forsyth Park, was the perfect jumping-off spot from which to experience the city. Occupying a



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Victorian mansion built in 1888, it's just opposite Forsyth Park – a large (30 acre) and leafy open space famous for a cast-iron fountain built to resemble the one in the Place de la Concorde in Paris – and just two minutes' walk to the first of many squares we visited in the Historic District.

The hotel has what many people consider the finest restaurant in Savannah, 700 Drayton, where we feasted on Southern delights such as She Crab bisque, collard greens and black-eyed peas. Before we moved on to the coast, we couldn't resist a meal at Paula Deen's restaurant, The Lady & Sons, on Congress Street. Her Southern fried chicken will leave a lasting impression on my waistline.

Choosing a resort hotel can be a tricky business but one of our most discerning friends, Lee Schrage, founder and director of the South Beach Wine and Food Festival, strongly recommended The Inn at Palmetto Bluff, both for its natural beauty and its cuisine. It is managed by Auberge Resorts, which is justly famous for its properties in Napa Valley (the flagship Auberge du Soleil) and Cabo San Lucas, Mexico (the Esperanza).

PALMETTO Bluff is a new resort built on an ancient property. The sea island was discovered in 1524 by French explorer Jean Ribaud, and by the mid-18th Century there were as many as 21 plantations there.

In 1914, R.T. Wilson Jr, a wealthy New York banker, built Palmetto Lodge, reputed to be the grandest structure in the Carolinas. Alas, this huge (72 rooms and 22 bathrooms) mansion burned down in 1926, but the picturesque ruins are still in the middle of the modern resort, a graceful reminder of the glories of the Old South.

The resort now consists of an elegant Main Building, with a lovely dining room and relaxing conservatory, a 'Village' with shops and casual restaurants, and a series of spectacular cottages in the Carolina Lowcountry style, some along the May river with stunning water views.

There is also a beautiful golf course – a necessity for me. The Jack Nicklaus signature course is carved out of the forest and, in his words, playing a round there is like 'a walk in the woods'. The fairways, some running right along the river, are lined with huge and magnificent oak trees and palmettos.

We stayed in one of the riverside

Getting there

America As You Like It (020 8742 8299, www.americaasyoulikeit.com) offers seven nights in South Carolina from £1,384 per person, with four nights in a cottage at **The Inn at Palmetto Bluff** (www.palmettobluffresort.com), three nights at the **Mansion on Forsyth Park** (www.kesslercollection.com), seven days' convertible-car hire and return flights from Gatwick to Savannah via Atlanta with Delta Airlines.

For further information on South Carolina, call 0800 783 1172 or visit www.discoversouthcarolina.com.

You can find a detailed guide to visiting America's Deep South at www.travelmail.co.uk

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