

BOLDLY GO BEYOND THE

BRIDGE

WITH JUST A LITTLE
PREPLANNING AND GAS, A
CAROLINA DAYCATION CAN
BE AN INTRIGUING ESCAPE
FROM THE ORDINARY. JUDY
BEAN LEADS THE CHARGE.

For the Savannah-centric, there's something daring about just driving onto the towering Talmadge Bridge. From way up there, we can see our glittering city, proud port and wide river laid out like our own tidy fiefdom. In contrast, the Carolina side looks like a wilderness — almost another world.

But it's a world worth exploring. In fact, it's practically a whole planetary system. We investigated Beaufort, Bluffton, Hilton Head Island and points between and found surprisingly separate spheres and shiny satellites — any one of which is worth an afternoon's trip.

Ready for Takeoff

The big bridge is part of U.S. Highway 17, the main north-south route east of Interstate 95. Before you drive up the ramp, be sure to check your gas gauge. As a rule, fuel is cheaper in South Carolina, but you won't find any for about eight miles.

Follow U.S. 17 about four miles before turning right on S.C. Route 170A. About three miles ahead, you'll enter little Levy, S.C. — marked by a caution light, two gas stations and the Pink Pig (843-784-3635, www.the-pink-pig.com), a much-admired barbecue joint. Three miles past Levy, you'll come to a traffic circle, where you have to start making choices.

Take the second right (state Route 46) to head toward Bluffton or the third (state Route 170) for Beaufort or Hilton Head Island. We'll tell you about them all, starting with Bluffton, the closest.



Proudly quirky Bluffton was settled as a British barony called "The Devil's Elbow." Nineteenth-century planters flocked from their steamy plantations to the bluff's cool river breezes.

415-2447, www.farmersmarketbluffton.com) offering fresh local produce in-season.

At **Bluffton Oyster Company** (843-757-4010) on Wharf Street, you can see mollusks getting shucked just off the boat. Call ahead to take home a mess of fresh seafood. Supplement it with fresh produce from **Cahill's Market** (843-757-2921, www.cahillsmarket.com), a real family farm shop on May River Road.

Want to eat in town? **The Cottage Café** on Calhoun is an area favorite for breakfast and lunch (843-757-0508). Locals also like the dubiously named **Squat 'n' Gobble** (843-757-4242), a funky 24-hour joint with a huge dessert menu on May River Road. For oysters, fried pickles and other regional specialties, go down the street to **Pepper's Porch** (843-757-2295, www.peppersporch.com).

For an outdoor adventure, kayak through the local estuary, where salt and fresh water mingle in a complex river maze. Ask **Native Guide Tours** (843-816-4538, www.nativeguidetours.com) to show you the way — and the otters, alligators, eagles, ospreys and dolphins that live there.

For ultimate indulgence, visit the **Spa at Palmetto Bluff** (843-796-6615, www.palmettobluffresort.com) within the inn of the same name, rated North America's best spa for service by *Travel & Leisure* magazine. It's about six miles southwest of old Bluffton on state Route 46. They proffer pleasures such as julep baths and sweet milk and rosebud scrubs — and "For Lovers" packages, too. Ooh! Reservations are required.



THE BLUFFTON BELT

Proudly quirky Bluffton was settled as a British barony called "The Devil's Elbow." Nineteenth-century planters flocked from their steamy plantations to the bluff's cool river breezes.

Old Bluffton lies seven miles past the traffic circle, just off Route 46. Look right, and keep your eyes peeled. Finding the old town can make you feel like Harry Potter finding Platform 9¾: It's not easy to get to, but fascinating once you do. The town is a marvelous mishmash of galleries, eateries and theme shops, with old homes (some literally falling down) in between.

On shady Calhoun Avenue, you'll find local folk art at **Gallery Without Walls** (843-338-7267); a high- to low-end mix at **The Filling Station** (843-263-4796, www.fillingstationartgallery.com) and the "best of Bluffton art" (according to *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*) at **Maye River Gallery** (843-757-2633, www.mayerivergallery.com). **Eggs'n'Tricities** (843-757-3446) exhibits a surprisingly sophisticated mix of clothes, cards, gifts and vintage goods. **The Barony** (843-422-2600) displays a Dr. Seuss-y assortment of eye-catching, consigned home décor. Monday through Thursday, this street hosts the **Bluffton Farmers Market** (843-

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Harbor Town

COURTESY HILTON HEAD ISLAND VISITOR & CONVENTION BUREAU & THE HARBOUR TOWN LIGHTHOUSE AT THE SEA PINES RESORT

PLANET HILTON HEAD

Today's Hilton Head Island reflects the vision of Charles Fraser, a 20th-century developer and Disney-esque dreamer, only greener. A proud "tree hugger," Fraser insisted on protecting the island's forests. Today, there are still stiff penalties for tree removal. Animals — especially birds — are still plentiful. It's not uncommon to see eagles and ospreys, some of which nest openly in man-made structures like feathered performance artists.

Shopping here is almost a fine art. A destination for the design-savvy, the island has lots of shops catering to tasteful homeowners. Locals recommend **Pyramids** (www.pyramidshiltonhead.com), a décor shop owned by well-known architects, and **35 Main** (843-681-5122, www.jbanksdesign.com) the retail showroom of the J. Banks interior design firm. Both are in Main Street, a development just off Highway 278 about a half-mile from its split with the Cross-Island Parkway.

Take the parkway (a toll road) to more décor in the **Village at Wexford** (www.villageatwexford.com) near the island's south end. Popular shops include **A Rare Find** for home décor (843-686-6607) and **Le Cookery** kitchen market (843-785-7171). But Wexford's best-known retailer may be **The Porcupine** (843-785-2779, www.porcupinestyle.com), a well-stocked clothing shop for



Harbour Town marina in Sea Pines, known for its landmark lighthouse, is a pleasant place to kick back and watch the bobbing yachts and deck-shoe set.



the well-heeled, featuring fashions from Etro, Escada, Stuart Weitzman and other darlings of the best-dressed.

Hilton Head can be a bargain bonanza, too. Resale, consignment and thrift shops abound, overflowing with residents' nearly new cast-offs. Check out the Arrow Road area west of Wexford for home décor. For clothes, don't miss **Sacks** (843-842-4222) around the corner on Palmetto Bay Road.

Head back to Main Street for all-designer duds at **The Stock Exchange** resale shop (www.thestockexchangeinc.com, 843-689-6777). About a mile up the road, the **St. Francis Thrift Shop** (843-689-5212, www.stfrancisshh.org/thriftshop) draws throngs of deal-seekers, especially on Wednesdays at 10 a.m., when they restock.

Not into shopping? Pedal instead. Google "bike rentals Hilton Head" for a quick list of vendors. Miles of well-maintained bike paths wind past golf courses and nature preserves and out to the public beach on Polk Avenue. This family-friendly area offers sandwich shops, ice cream and souvenirs.

Or try parasailing. **H2O Sports Nature Center** (843-671-4386, www.h2osports-online.com) in Sea Pines Plantation offers lessons, along with kayak rentals and nature tours. **Sea Pines** (866-561-8802, www.seapines.com), on the island's south end, is a popular small resort in itself. It costs \$5 to enter, but you can easily spend half a day there, shopping, dining, walking and people-watching. **Harbour Town** marina in Sea Pines, known for its landmark lighthouse, is a pleasant place to kick back and watch the bobbing yachts and deck-shoe set.

For dinner, try **Redfish** (843-686-3388, www.redfishofhiltonhead.com) on nearby Palmetto Bay Road, which locals say has an "incredible" wine selection. The best burgers are said to be served at **Truffles** (843-785-3663, www.trufflescafe.com) just off Pope Avenue and the best ice cream at **Hilton Head Ice Cream** (843-842-6333) on Arrow Road. For Italian, try **Michael Anthony's Cucina Italiana** (843-785-6272, www.michael-anthonys.com) on New Orleans Road. Locals also vote for **Santa Fe Café** (843-785-3838, www.santafecafeofhiltonhead.com) and **Sea Grass Grille** (843-785-9990, www.seagrassgrille.com), about three miles up U.S. Highway 278.

BEAUFORT AND SATELLITES

Please don't dismiss Beaufort as merely a smaller Savannah. Sure, both are known for old homes and Southern charm. Both were occupied — not burned — by Union troops in



Wide Waterfront Park offers gorgeous views of the Beaufort River and nearby islands. Enjoy them from riverside swings or the grassy amphitheatre.



IMAGES COURTESY HILTON HEAD ISLAND VISITOR & CONVENTION BUREAU

"the War." But unlike Savannah, a true city, old Beaufort is all small-town.

Large mansions with larger verandas — some built as summer cottages for wealthy planters — look out on a vast, sparkling harbor. Carriages carry tourists up and down the quaint streets. An easy-to-stroll shopping district lines sunny downtown Bay Street, offering home décor at several stores; local wine and free tastings at **Low Country Winery** (843-379-3010); and fine art at several highly regarded galleries.

Wide **Waterfront Park** offers gorgeous views of the Beaufort River and nearby islands. Enjoy them from riverside swings or the grassy amphitheatre. This park hosts the town's frequent festivals. Expect even more than usual this year, Beaufort's Tricentennial.

For food with your river view, try **Panini's on Bay Street**, a fragrant pizzeria housed in an old bank (843-379-0300, www.paniniscafe.net). **Saltus River Grill** down the street (843-379-3474, www.saltusrivergrill.org) gets rave reviews, as does **Breakwater** restaurant, (843-379-0052, www.breakwaterterc.com) on Carteret Street. Uptown on Congress Street, the cozy **Magnolia Bakery Cafe** (843-524-1961) inhabits an old sun porch, also with a river view.

The water views promise broader adventures, well worth exploring. **Visit Hunting Island State Park** (843-838-2011, www.huntingisland.com) for its marsh boardwalk, fishing pier, biking/hiking trails and four miles of pristine beaches. You can rent bikes from **Barefoot Bubba's** (843-838-9222, www.barefootbubbas.com) at the base of



Beaufort, S.C.

the bridge, where they've been known to give kids free ice cream.

Kids and adults enjoy the spectacular Friday graduations and Marine memorabilia museum at the **Parris Island Marine Corps Recruit Depot** (843-228-3650, www.mcrdpi.usmc.mil). Civilians are welcome with valid driver's licenses, car insurance and registrations.

Experience rich Gullah culture — the unique Southeastern Creole mix of African and European arts and languages — on St. Helena Island. Here, **Penn Center** (843-838-2432, www.penncenter.com), on the site of a school for freed slaves, works to preserve and share Gullah heritage, including its prized

sweetgrass baskets (available here) and unforgettable, lilting language.

For a misty morning adventure — or a spine-tingling nighttime one — don't miss the **Old Sheldon Church** ruins, about 15 miles north of Beaufort on U.S. Highway 21. Surrounded by ancient graves and looming oaks, these ancient brick-and-tabby church remains attract photographers and awed onlookers from all over the world.

Next time you need a change of scenery — without taking vacation time or a big hit to your budget — cross the Savannah River and expand your orbit a bit. There's a lot worth exploring beyond the bridge. ■



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Old Sheldon Church ruins



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