



GOING FOR Gold

Georgia's 110-mile coast packs in a wealth of treasures, from Savannah's historic downtown to the white-sand beaches of the Golden Isles and coastal communities with West African roots. Go island-hopping here among moss-draped maritime forests to discover a magnificent variety of wildlife, including right whales and loggerhead sea turtles

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IMAGE: AWL IMAGES

In the early autumn light, the salt marshes of Georgia's Golden Isles glow a glittering amber.

I hike along the shoreline as maritime forests dripping in Spanish moss arch their limbs above me. A bald eagle stands watch on its perch. Bright blue kingfishers skim the still pink of the river.

Suddenly, my guide, Willy Hazlehurst, stops and puts a finger to his lips, pointing to a circle of bubbling water just beyond the beach. A splash, an exhale, two nostrils poking above the water. Then I see them: three manatees playing in the shallows, their big, cumbersome bellies breaking the surface as they perform slow, lazy rolls.

"This is why I love these islands," Willy says in melodic, Southern tones. "You can get the beach anywhere, but this is something hard to put into words." Here are three that might just do: pure Georgia gold. I thought these islands were named after that sunrise colour. But now I get it — these islands are golden because of the way they make you feel.

Despite being a mere 110 miles long, Georgia's coast packs a big punch. Ecologists call it the 'Georgia Bite' because it's the innermost point of a stretch of coast that gapes like an open mouth as it extends south from Cape Fear, in North Carolina, to Cape

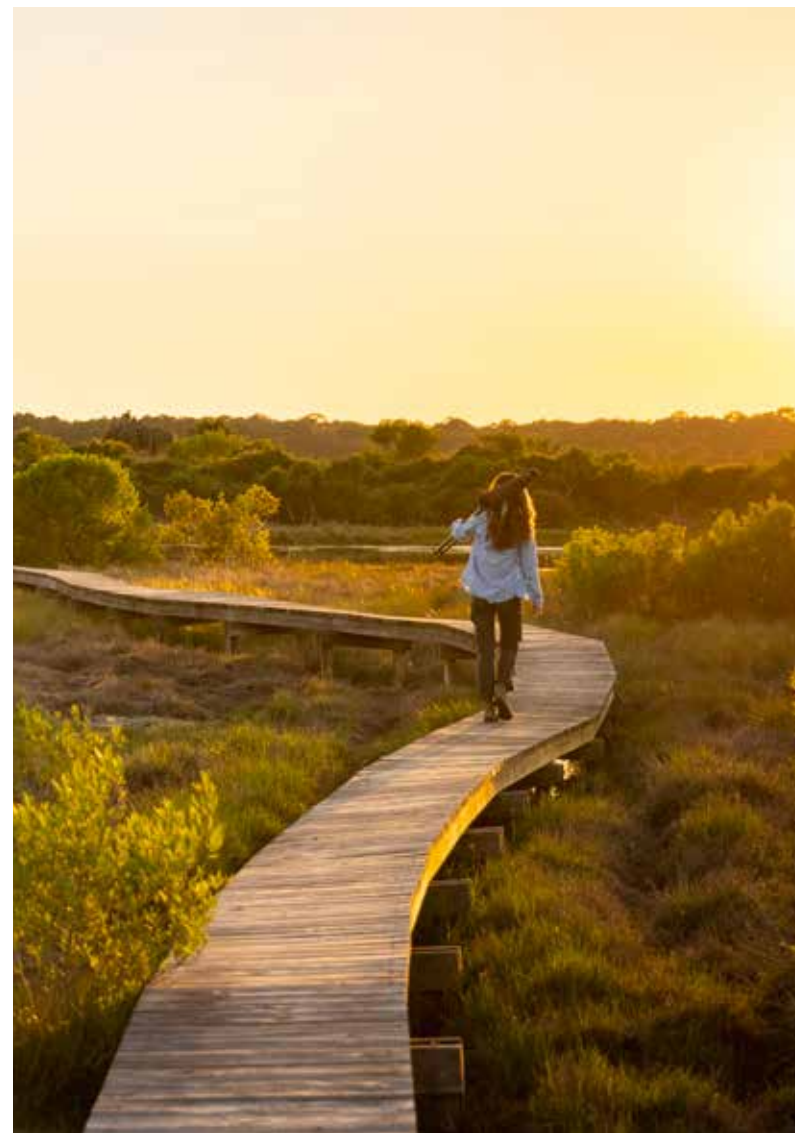
Canaveral, in Florida. That unique geology funnels a huge diversity of plant and marine life towards its shores, from loggerhead sea turtles, which lay their eggs here every summer, to right whales — among the most critically endangered animals on the planet — which use the warm, mineral-rich waters as a calving ground in winter.

And those shores harbour even more natural treasures: the barrier islands. Just a few miles from land, between shallow inlets and bays, 14 are woven together to create a sea balustrade. On their eastern sides are dunes and vast sand beaches. On their west, coastal forests as verdant and teeming with life as a tropical jungle. These are the Golden Isles, and I plan to spend a week travelling between four of the best. I'm seeking that feeling Willy found hard to put into words. I'm looking for pure Georgia gold.

I begin a few miles inland, in a city just as rich, only in history, food, architecture and art: Savannah, the queen of the south. In 1864, towards the end of America's bloody Civil War, General Sherman marched his Northern troops through Georgia, destroying all as he went. But when he reached

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Salt marsh at Clam Creek, Jekyll Island; a kingfisher, one of 300 species of bird seen along the region's coastal trails; Little St Simons naturalist Emily Engle heads towards a wildlife blind with her spotting scope to study migratory birds
PREVIOUS PAGES: Driftwood Beach, at the north end of Jekyll Island

IMAGES: GETTY; BEN GALLAND





At Sapelo Island, I drive an hour south, the dawn mist hovering like a thick chalk line over the lowland fields

Savannah, he stopped. It's said he found the city too beautiful to burn. Savannah is that rare thing in urban American: a city that's not only preserved its heritage charm, but somehow added to it as well.

I walk through leafy squares draped in centuries-old oaks, with fountains bubbling at their centre. Mansions of every architectural style line the streets — Greek revival columns, gothic pinnacles, stout, whitewashed Regency homes. Steamboats ply the river. Everything is as soft and soothing as a Southern breeze. My steps slow, I meander beneath tall palm trees, no fixed destination in mind. Historic centres can often feel cut off from real life, places for tourists to gawp at and drool over. Not here. Although it may hark back to days gone by, there's nothing prim and prissy about Savannah. "This is a local's city," one resident tells me. "We're laid-back, but we play hard, too."

She's right. Savannah isn't snooty, it's salty. It's briny hedonism and history wrapped into one little cultural bundle of gastronomic, boozy joy. The best restaurant in town is The Grey. Housed in a former Greyhound bus station, its 1938 art deco flourishes have been beautifully restored to their original sheen. I eat a feast of tapas-like bites with a soulful Southern twist: ruby-red shrimp and grits, triggerfish draped in ginger. The nearby Good Times Jazz Bar & Restaurant is a close second. It has Georgia peach cobbler on the menu — often with a smoking hot drum solo from regular bands. But that's only half the

story. On Johnson Square, I meet Vaughnette Goode-Walker, aka Sister V, a local African American historian who leads tours that follow in the footsteps of the slaves who once arrived here in their thousands, marched from the port to the plantations. She shows me the market square where enslaved men, women and children were bought and sold, the holding pens where they were kept like cattle, tiny arrow slits in thick granite walls for air. Dark histories woven like shadows under the birdsong and dappled light.

At the end, Vaughnette bursts into song: "If I be a slave," she sings, "I be buried in my grave and go home to my god and be free." It's a song that was sung by her ancestors, and they were there with her, I think, in every broken note. We talked of many things that morning, but those two lines, sung with eyes closed and fists clenched, said it all and more.

SPIRIT OF SAPELO

Nearby, at Sapelo Island, that story continues. I drive an hour south, the dawn mist hovering like a thick chalk line over the lowland fields, hop on a ferry and cross the Doboy Sound, seagulls hungry for an easy catch trailing in our wake. Just 11 miles long and four miles wide at its broadest point, this tiny island is home to fewer than 50 permanent residents. But their place on this island is remarkable.

At the dock, I meet Yvonne Grovner, a traditional basket weaver with deep roots on the island. She drives me to meet the Hog Hammock community on the eastern shore.

IMAGES: VISIT SAVANNAH; GETTY; CHIA CHONG

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Savannah's skyline, famed for its antebellum architecture; riverfront promenade with steamboats at sunrise, Savannah; oysters at The Grey restaurant, Savannah

They live in a collection of humble, weather-torn shotgun houses (so called, it's said, because you could shoot a gun through the front door of these narrow, one-room-wide houses and the bullet would go straight out the back door without hitting a wall).

Hog Hammock was established in 1857. It's current residents are the direct descendants of the enslaved West Africans who once worked the local fields. After emancipation, they chose to remain, making homes out of their former quarters and living off the land and sea. One of America's last intact Gullah Geechee island communities, they have their own dialect, customs and beliefs, and it's here they're making a stand to keep their roots alive. At the island's only shop, I meet Maurice Bailey, who's fighting to hold his community together and pass down the farming techniques of his ancestors: growing red peas from heritage seeds and harvesting sugarcane to press into sweet syrup at the mill.

It's not easy: although a popular spot for holiday homes (the local white-sand beach is deserted and pristine), here in Hog Hammock there's extreme poverty and few opportunities. But there is hope still.

"The African American people are the spirit of Sapelo," Maurice says. "That spirit comes from good times to bad times, from slavery to now, and that spirit is still here."

And it's palpable, because despite its challenges, Sapelo is a disarmingly welcoming place. I'm shown shells and the sun-bleached skeletons of a small, flat

species of sea urchin called a sand dollar found on the beach, people come and shake my hand, Yvonne teaches me her art — twisting dried sweet grass reeds, taken from the marsh, into beautiful patterns.

Later that night, in a cottage called The Birdhouse, right in the heart of Hog Hammock, I watch the sun set over the marsh. My shoulders drop. I sigh and I slip into a long, blissful sleep. There are few things this island does fast, I think, except slow you down.

And it's not alone. Most of the Golden Isles, first cultivated for shipbuilding and plantations in the 17th and 18th centuries, were then bought up by wealthy industrialists as hunting lodges and winter playgrounds. Little St Simons, however, a 50-mile drive and a short boat ride south, was spared development.

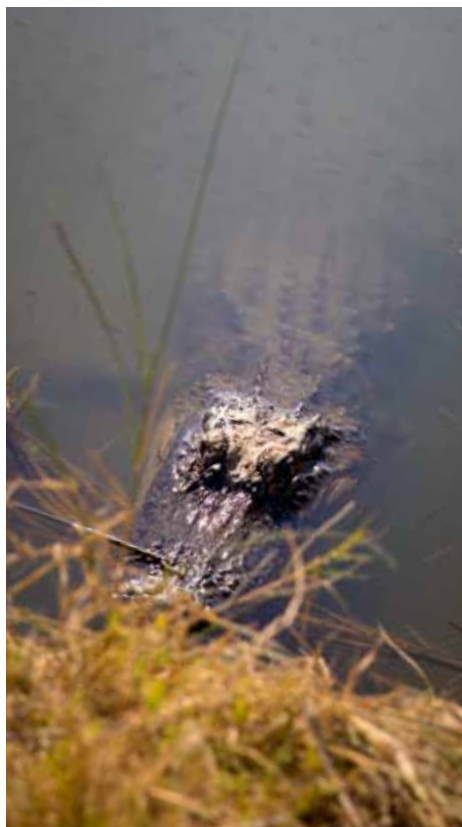
"It's an ecological jewel," says Stacia Hendricks, Little St Simon's lead naturalist as she shows me round. "It has the answers to questions we're not even thinking to ask yet."

It's also, in geological terms, pretty much brand new. The Altamaha River, Georgia's largest, flows down from the high country in the north to the edge of this island, dumping 100,000 gallons per second of freshwater into the sea. Little St Simons was formed from the sediment it carries and is expanding at an astonishing rate. Around 4,000 years ago, there was nothing here. In the 13 years that Stacia has worked on the island, it's expanded 1,000 acres — about the size of 50 football pitches — into the sea. Because of that, and

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CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Norm the alligator sunning himself on the bank of Norm's Pond as a roseate spoonbill flies overhead, Little St Simons; Aaron Millar visiting the historic chocolate plantation in Little Sapelo Island; Yvonne Grovner weaves a basket on Sapelo Island, home to one of the last Gullah Geechee communities in the US





FROM LEFT: An alligator in a tidal creek, Little St Simons; Allie Smith, one of the naturalists on Little St Simons Island, inspecting a marsh mallow flower

the fact that it's so untouched, it's like the Rosetta Stone of island ecology, a place, as Stacia says, of "hemispheric importance".

She's right. And it's not just important for the scientific world, but for all of us. We walk through forests echoing with birdsong (more than 300 species live or migrate through here each year) and thick with centuries-old magnolia trees in full bloom. Neon-coloured rough green snakes — perfectly disguised as palm leaves — slither through the sand. Silver armadillos, like armoured racoons, potter through the brush. Blue dragonflies swarm above me in an explosion of colour and fluttering wings. I see two baby alligators lounging on a swamp log no bigger than my hand, mama slinking through the water nearby.

Then, as we picnic beside a duckweed-laced pond, an eagle passes overhead, startling a flock of white ibis, which take flight suddenly, filling the sky like an enormous cloud. There are places to relax, places for adventure, I think. Little St Simons is a place to feel the web of the natural world in all its interconnected beauty.

And you can feel that in style, too. Funding the island's science and conservation efforts is an eco-resort known simply as The Lodge on Little St Simons Island, offering family-style farm-to-table dining, cute cottages, nature walks, river kayaking, bike riding, fishing and the chance to soak up the sun on your own private, seven-mile-long beach. I stay a day and leave as if saying goodbye to an old friend.

LIVING COLOUR

The Golden Isles are calling — my island-hopping experience isn't over yet. Just across the water is Little St Simons' big brother: St Simons, one of two barrier islands accessible by car. It's the polar opposite of its sibling, with bars, restaurants and shops — the highlight being its food.

At Georgia Sea Grill, I sit down with local organic farmer Sam McPherson, of Potlikker Farm, one of a handful of passionate young organic growers pushing the south Georgia food scene towards fresher, healthier heights. Gone is the typical Southern fare of fried chicken and barbecue ribs. Here, it's all about food from the sea and garden, caught or picked that day. I eat grilled catfish, plucked from a local pond by the head chef himself, and green salad with roasted beets and feta cheese, harvested by Sam's hand.

"The ocean is regenerative," he tells me. "It's always fresh, always coming and going. We want to do that with our food too."

But there's more than just good eating to be had. At Jekyll Island, the second car-accessible isle, half an hour to the south, I hire a bike and wheel through 25 miles of trails that twist round the island's shore and through the forests of the interior. I spot turtle nests — each harbouring a clutch of future hatchlings waiting to begin their perilous journey to sea. I walk along Driftwood Beach, a section of a sandy bay covered in a petrified forest — the limbs of its ancient trees poking from the sand like sculptures of ghost totems. ➤



Wild horses passing under moss-draped trees on Cumberland Island

If Sapelo and Little St Simons were quiet pieces of history and wonder; Jekyll is holiday fun: I sip margaritas while watching waves crash on the shore, and fall asleep on the beach as fishermen cast nets out to sea.

Cumberland Island, my last stop, is different and perhaps the most glittering of all the Golden Isles. A national park, accessible only by a 45-minute ferry ride, it was once the playground for the kings of America's industrial Gilded Age, the Carnegies, who left behind two outrageous mansions (one now lying in ruins, the other still immaculate) and — among other ostentatious things — an icehouse. Presumably those gilded G&Ts just weren't the same if they weren't served on the rocks.

But before then, Cumberland was the home of the Timucua, and it's the legacy of this Native Americans group that I feel most acutely here. They called the island Mocoma (their word for 'ocean') and they lived in peace here for more than 1,000 years, fishing, hunting game, foraging for edible plants and making some of the earliest-known pottery found anywhere in the New World.

It's here, too, that I meet Willy Hazlehurst, the local guide who'll later show me manatees and whisper of the island's magic — that feeling that's so hard to put into words. We hike along sandy paths though lush, moss-dripped forests stunted from

centuries of salt air whose trees twist like dancers above our heads. Willy shows me one of many shell middens. Apparently, the Timucua were quite tidy, because all along the shores and inland waterways are enormous piles — most now buried in the dirt — comprising tens of thousands of discarded oyster shells.

"Stick a shovel in the ground just about anywhere," Willy says, "and you'll find the remains of their dinner."

Heading to the north of the island, Willy stops suddenly scouring the ground, plucking three black hooks from the silt and dropping them in my hands: fossilised shark teeth, dredged from the nearby sound. Thousands of years after they were formed, they're still sharp enough to cut.

Later that afternoon, we set up camp on the sandy floor beside the river's edge, surrounded by the cautious foraging of wild horses and the splashing of manatees nearby. We watch a full moon rise pink over the ocean dunes and a sun set over the salt marsh in a startling colour I've never seen in nature before coming to Georgia.

But it's a colour I recognise now, a colour that glitters in low sun, a colour shared in wonder from the Timucua to the Sapelo slaves and beyond. It seeps into your skin like the rising tide. It's three simple words: pure Georgia gold. □

ESSENTIALS



Getting there & around

British Airways and Delta offer nonstop flights between Heathrow and Atlanta, Georgia. Virgin Atlantic flies nonstop from Heathrow and Manchester. ba.com delta.com virginatlantic.com

Little St Simons and Jekyll Island are accessible by car, while car-free Sapelo, Little St Simons and Cumberland reached by ferry. Arrange tours of Sapelo and Little St Simons in advance. jekyllisland.com cumberlandisland.com littlestsimonsisland.com sapelonerr.org

When to go

Summer in southern Georgia can be busy and humid, with highs of 35C and summer storms. Spring and autumn offer pleasant temperatures in the high 20Cs, with spring the best season for migrating birds and nesting sea turtles.

Places mentioned

The Grey. theygreyrestaurant.com
 Good Times Jazz Bar & Restaurant. goodtimesjazzbar.com
 Footprints of Savannah Walking Tours. footprintsofsavannah.com
 Sapelo Island Tours. sapelotours.com
 Georgia Sea Grill. georgiaseagrill.com
 Potlikker Farm. @potlikkerfarm
 Southeast Adventure. southeastadventure.com

Where to stay

The Marshall House, Savannah. From \$150 (£111). marshallhouse.com
 Birdhouses, Sapelo. From \$255 (£188). facebook.com/sapeloislandbirdhouses
 Lodge On Little St Simons. From \$525 (£387), B&B. littlestsimonsisland.com
 Jekyll Island Club Resort. From \$399 (£295). jekyllclub.com
 Cumberland Island Camping. From \$9 (£7). nps.gov/cuis

More info

Golden Isles. goldenisles.com
 Explore Georgia. exploregeorgia.org

How to do it

PURELY SOUTHERN USA offers the 13-night Coastal Georgia self-drive from £1,949 per person including flights to Atlanta, car hire and accommodation. purelysouthernusa.co.uk