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Gilded Age, Roaring 20s live on in the South's grand hotels

TRAVEL

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Charming coastal inns recall the glamour of bygone eras.

With modern-day cultural phenomena such as HBO's "The Gilded Age" and PBS's "Downton Abbey," as well as the recent theatrical release of "Downton Abbey: A New Era," it's no surprise that there has been a resurgence of all things turn of the century. Whether it's the Gilded Age, the Progressive Era or the Roaring Twenties, the years leading up to and following the turn of the 20th century — with its over-the-top opulence, luxury and elegance — is all the rage. And the Southeast coast is rich with inns and resorts of the period that give guests the opportunity to immerse themselves in the grandeur of those eras.

From architecture of a bygone era to luxe accommodations, lavish interior decors to impeccable service and sumptuous dining to period entertainment, a host of coastal accommodations that opened during this exciting time in American history harken back to the days of our nation's earliest millionaires and the lavish lifestyles they led.

Here are three historic inns along a 100-mile stretch of the Georgia and northeast Florida coastlines that will have you feeling like a millionaire from the moment you pull into the driveway or arrive at the dock.

Jekyll Island Club Resort

Located along Georgia's gorgeous Golden Isles, Jekyll Island Club Resort was once the home of the "Millionaire's Club," a vacation destination for America's wealthiest families, representing about one-sixth of the world's wealth and including familiar names such as Rockefeller, Morgan, Vanderbilt, Astor, Gould, Pulitzer and their friends and colleagues.

Now part of Jekyll Island State Park, which is celebrating its 75th anniversary this year, the entire island oozes Lowcountry sophistication the minute you drive across the causeway, as lush palm trees, moss-draped centuries-old live oaks and windswept dunes rise along the horizon.

Sophisticated historic accommodations that housed the rich and famous can be found in San Souci (French for "carefree"), built in 1896 for some of the club's founding members, including J. P. Morgan. Billed as America's first known condominium, it originally was composed of six private, 3,500-square-foot apartments but now houses 24 modern rooms. Two of the original "cottages" built as luxurious private member homes are also available for overnight stays. The resort also features a modern, 40-room oceanfront option at the Jekyll Ocean Club.

Guests can enjoy many of the same activities that original club members did, including croquet on the front lawn, bicycling along oyster tabby paths, playing golf on one of four courses, playing tennis on one of 13 clay courts and swimming in the ocean, a short distance away.

Additionally, the resort offers history tours via trolley and horseback, visits to the neighboring Georgia Sea Turtle Center, dolphin tours, charter fishing and shopping at the Pier Road shops, which formerly served as housing for Club employees.

Meals at Jekyll Island Club continue the millionaire's tradition, starting in the Grand Dining Room where breakfast, Sunday brunch and special holiday meals are served in an historic ambiance appointed with a fireplace, grand columns and black-and-white photos of the Club of yesteryear. Casual lunches are provided at The Pantry, while dinner is served at The Wharf, where guests back in the day would arrive by boat, and Eighty Ocean Kitchen and Bar at Jekyll Ocean Club, which offers a contemporary culinary experience that would make any millionaire proud.

Jekyll Island Club Resort. \$389 and up. 371 Riverview Drive, Jekyll Island. 912-319-4349, www.jekyllclub.com.

Greyfield Inn

The largest and southernmost of Georgia's sea islands, Cumberland Island is one of the most unspoiled and natural of all the Golden Isles. Accessible only by ferry, the 18-mile-long island of salt marshes and tidal creeks features the Cumberland Island National Park, a protected wilderness thick with centuries-old live oak trees draped with Spanish moss and palmetto plants, as well as herds of wild horses and the Gilded Age sanctuary Greyfield Inn.

Credit: Peter Frank Edwards

Built in 1900 by Thomas Carnegie (brother of steel magnate Andrew Carnegie) and his wife Lucy as a gift for their daughter, Margaret, Greyfield Inn was opened as an inn by Margaret's daughter, Lucy Ferguson and her family in 1962. It remains the only commercial establishment on the island. Still run by fifth and sixth generations of the Carnegie family, the 14-room inn exudes the same romance and character it did when it was a family home where guests of the Gilded Age were entertained.



Outside, an inviting front porch welcomes guests with rocking chairs and bench swings. Inside, a large and warm parlor, an honor bar, a library filled floor to ceiling with old books, a richly appointed dining room and the Inn's unique guest rooms are appointed with original family heirlooms, antiques and family photos, making visitors feel like houseguests of millionaire acquaintances. Bathrooms feature original claw-foot tubs and marble sinks, while the kitchen sports the original stove.

The day begins with a full breakfast served each morning, and a picnic lunch is provided for eating on the porch or patio or on an island excursion. In the evening, a single seating is held for a formal three-course dinner, much of it prepared with ingredients from Greyfield's 1.5-acre garden. Guests are requested to wear appropriate dinner attire (jackets for men and casual dresses for women), making the evening a festive affair, followed by a nightcap on the front porch or by the firepit under the stars.

Days are filled much the same way the Carnegies and their guests wiled away their time: swimming and sunbathing on the deserted beaches, walking, biking and visiting the historic relics of the island, including the ruins of the original Carnegie home, Dungeness. Modern day guests can kayak and take a tour with the resident naturalist and historian.

The Greyfield Inn. \$675 a night, includes meals, activities and ferry transportation. Two-night minimum required. 4 N 2nd St, Cumberland Island. [904-261-6408](tel:904-261-6408), www.greyfieldinn.com.

Ponte Vedra Inn & Club

At the turn of the 20th century, Ponte Vedra on Florida's northeast coast was little more than an uninhabited swath of sand dunes, marshlands and palmetto trees. By 1912, the dunes had been discovered to be rich in valuable minerals that aided in the production of steel. By the end of WWI, the need for ore dwindled and The National Lead Company transformed the beachfront property into a resort playground for the nation's socialites. The Ponte Vedra Club opened its doors in 1928 to much fanfare among Florida's Who's Who.

As word spread, the well-heeled and moneyed movers and shakers from the North came to the resort with their families and guests for sun, sand, surf, sports and socializing. Today, those traditions live on at Ponte Vedra Inn & Club's 300-acre luxury oceanfront resort.

The elegance of an earlier time begins as guests arrive for check-in, located in the Historic Inn, part of the original 1937 clubhouse. The reception area is understated coastal elegance, with the nearby Great Lounge offering two fireplaces, vaulted ceilings and furnishings that exude the lifestyles of the rich and famous. Just off the lounge is the original Inn Dining Room boasting soaring ceilings, stunning wood beams and a full breakfast each morning.

Other amenities of the Historic Inn include a small history museum filled with photos of the inn's early days, The Tavern, The Gourmet Shop café serving coffee, pastries, sandwiches, salads and wines, as well as several shops.

Among the amenities the upper crust would have enjoyed back in the day, there is golf, tennis, croquet and several swimming pools. Modern day amenities include a 30,000-square-foot spa and an oceanfront fitness center.

But the true calling card of Ponte Vedra is the exquisite accommodations. With island or lagoon views from rooms in the Historic Inn or oceanfront rooms and suites just steps away from the beach (many of which recently underwent renovations), guests will feel pampered and spoiled, just as the wealthy forebears that came before them.

Ponte Vedra Inn & Club. \$732 and up. 200 Ponte Vedra Blvd., Ponte Vedra Beach, Florida. [\(888\) 839-9145](tel:888-839-9145), www.pontevedra.com.