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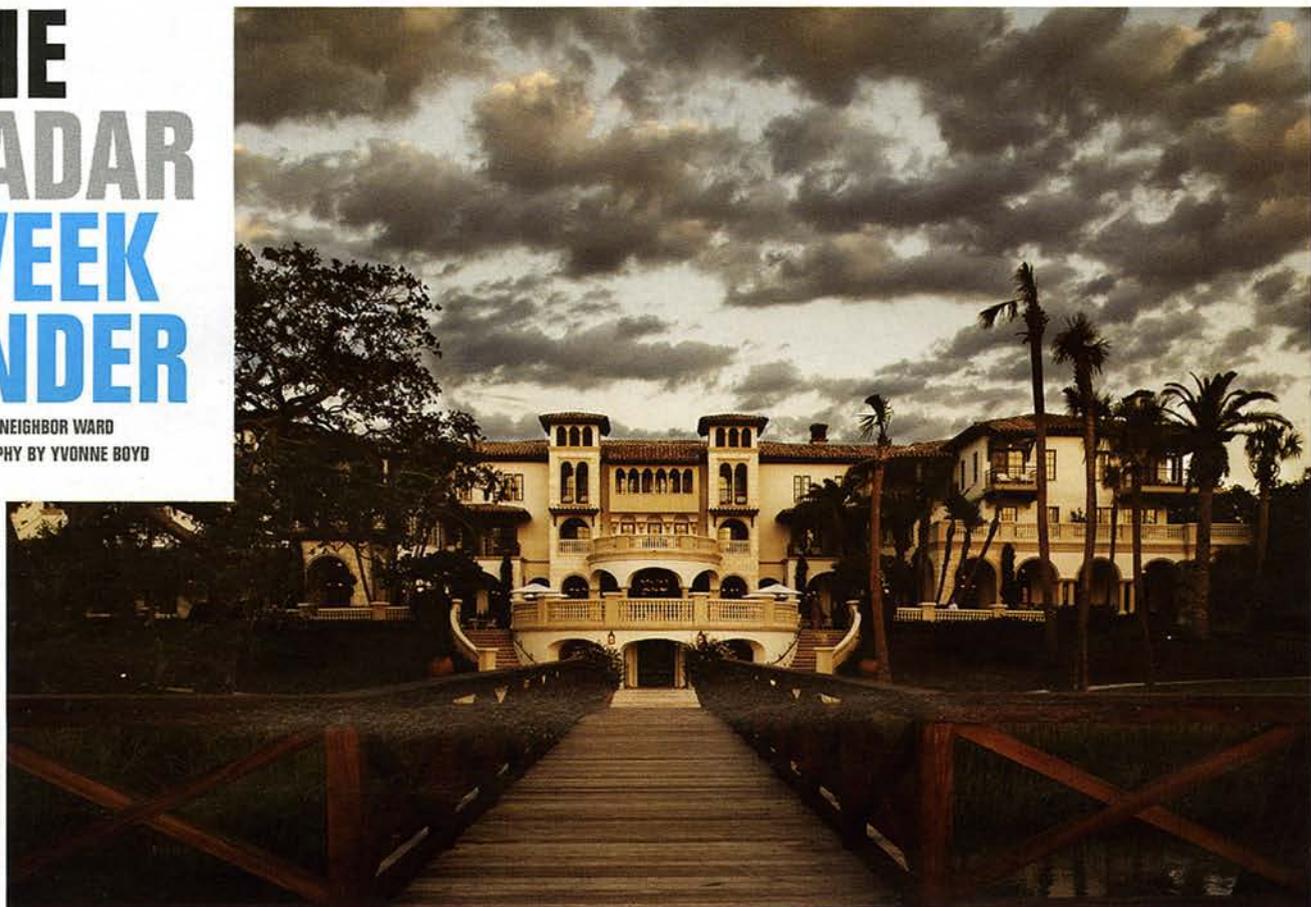
OK GO ROCKS THE TOWN

flower power!



THE RADAR WEEK ENDER

BY TRAVIS NEIGHBOR WARD
PHOTOGRAPHY BY YVONNE BOYD



The Cloister Hotel, as seen from the Black Banks River.

PARADISE FOUND

With a growing list of Hollywood clientele, the newly rebuilt Cloister at Sea Island raises the bar for East Coast beach resorts

After passing through the elegant, three-story Colonial Lounge of The Cloister Hotel, down quiet corridors and past lavishly decorated lounges and sitting areas, I arrive at the ballroom. Secret Service agents standing at the doors eye me curiously then turn away as I wave my pass and enter. Inside, the 41st President, George H.W. Bush, is seated on a small stage beside his daughter, Doro, who is telling intimate stories from her book, *My Father, My President*. The Bushes are the first act during the VIP grand opening party, a weekend of activities celebrating the newly completed reincarnation of this 1928 beach resort. Located on Sea Island, Georgia, halfway between Savannah and Jacksonville, Florida, it's just one product of a \$350-million, four-year project that will be completed this fall.

Bush, like many well-heeled elite from the surrounding Southern states and Washington, DC, is no stranger to The Cloister; he's been coming here for years with his family. Long before the G8 Summit was held here in 2004, he and Barbara honeymooned in this posh play-place. From Steve Forbes and Bob Woodward to Mitt Romney and Bob Schieffer (who has a house here), the high-powered politicians and media magnates have flocked to the five miles of pristine beaches, nature preserves, top-notch golf courses and privacy of The Cloister for years.

But, there is another, newer generation of guests trickling in.

Leonardo DiCaprio, Anna Kournikova, Katie Couric, Bryant Gumbel and John Travolta have all jetted to these parts. This particular weekend, Harry Connick Jr. headed here with his family to perform a private concert for guests.

The resort's renovation is the brainchild of Bill Jones III, chairman and CEO of Sea Island Company (and the fourth generation of the original founding family). The opulence is apparent from the moment you arrive. Swarms of valet attendants give you the sign that something seriously service-oriented is going on here. Upon check-in you're assigned your own 24-hour butler, whose duties might include preparing your morning ensemble or drawing you a scented bath from an extensive spa menu.

The eye for detail is matched in the Mediterranean-style architecture and classical interior design. California architect Peter Capone consulted drawings by Addison Mizner, the original architect. The buildings are graced with Spanish tile roofs and lantern-lit covered breezeways, and incorporate a staggering quantity of stone and reclaimed vintage lumber. Outside, paths wind from one courtyard to another, most graced with fountains, clipped boxwood and cottage-garden-style plantings. Inside, some walls are made of heart pine salvaged from demolished buildings. Carved cypress covers the vaulted ceilings.

1. The Georgian Room restaurant.
2. Spa at Sea Island's swimming pool.
3. The Georgian Suite by Tibi.
4. The Colonial Lounge.



The interior design is the brainchild of local Pamela Hughes of McLean, Virginia. Elegant leather furnishings, antiques and over 600 handwoven Turkish rugs abound. Hughes' revamp includes the enormous Colonial Lounge, which is a three-story space ringed by 30 guest suites. Intensely quiet, guests' voices are muted and cell phones, thankfully, prohibited. At the ceiling, clerestory windows throw bands of sunlight across the beams, making the room feel more like a church nave than a lobby. Wrought-iron chandeliers, a grand, stone staircase and palace-size tapestry add to the Medieval feel.

The fashion faction will likely gather in the main building's Georgian Suite. Tibi's Amy Smilovic designed this study in ocean blues and yellow greens. A counterpoint to the Old World opulence found everywhere else, this plush pad mixes mod accents and a distinct Billy Baldwin-esque Hollywood glamour.

But guests cannot live on design alone, so there are the myriad of fine dining dens, all overseen by executive chef Todd Rogers. Sip tea in the secluded Solarium. Or head to the Wine Cellar, kept at 60

to 64 degrees during dinner, where you can reserve the private dining room for 14 guests to enjoy a vino-centric tasting menu. In the formal Georgian Room, which *Esquire's* John Mariani just named one of the best new restaurants of 2006, you can linger among fine linens, Bernardaud china, Puiforcat silver and, yes, finger bowls. The menu changes seasonally; dishes on the winter menu ranged from vanilla poached lobster appetizers and cauliflower-clam risotto to maple mustard glazed venison tenderloin.

Another superb standout is the 65,000-square-foot Spa at Sea Island. Entering it is like passing into a tropical rain forest. An expansive atrium with 30-foot-tall palm trees and chaise lounges sits across from an indoor swimming pool and squash courts. Treatment rooms offer up Jasmine wraps, Japanese Basu bathing regimes and sea salt pedicures, among others.

There are kids' camps, a clay target shooting school, a yacht club, three 18-hole championship golf courses, 18 tennis courts, and newly built riding stables, which house more than 40 horses. When I take a stables tour, the director explains that you can even hold an elegant wedding right here—on horseback or in the middle of the riding ring. Somehow, when I hear this, I'm hardly surprised. ■

Sea Island is connected to the Georgia coastline by a causeway, and just 1.5 hours from international airports in Savannah, Georgia, and Jacksonville, Florida. Delta services the Brunswick Golden Island Airport, 14 miles away; private aircraft can access the Malcolm McKimmon Airport on St. Simons Island, 4 miles away. Peak rates start at \$595 per night for standard rooms and go up to \$5,000 per night for the Sea Island and Black Banks River Suites. Sea Island also includes The Lodge at Sea Island, located on a golf course, which has won "Top Small Hotel" by Zagat for the past three years, as well as AAA Five Diamond and Mobil 5-Star awards. Call 888.732.4752 or www.seaisland.com.