

The Hammock Coast Awaits

By Sam Boykin

Just south of Myrtle Beach lies a pristine peninsula known as the Hammock Coast, characterized by blackwater rivers, saltwater creeks, expansive pine forests and cypress swamps. The area is a great year-round destination for everyone from history buffs to outdoor enthusiasts.

GEORGETOWN

South Carolina's third-oldest city, Georgetown, was founded in 1729 and rose to prominence as a crucial seaport, exporting everything from rice – grown along the city's riverbanks – to lumber, which was transported to New England shipbuilders and construction companies in the early 1900s.

Today you can soak up the city's rich history by strolling through the downtown area, marked by beautiful antebellum homes, towering oak trees, cozy shops and boutiques, along with great restaurants, such as The Rice Paddy (rated AAA Three Diamond) and The River Room (Two Diamond), which offer fresh, locally caught seafood.

For a bit of history, check out the Georgetown County Museum, the South Carolina Maritime Museum and the Rice Museum. For an up-close look at Georgian-style architecture, visit the Kaminski House Museum, which overlooks the Sampit River. The circa-1769 house is filled with English and American antique furniture and decorative arts.

PAWLEYS ISLAND/LITCHFIELD BEACH

About 10 miles north of Georgetown are the quaint coastal communities of Litchfield Beach and Pawleys Island, renowned for unspoiled beaches and great surf.

Rent a surfboard, paddleboard or kayak from Surf the Earth and catch some waves or explore the salt marsh eco-systems and blackwater rivers. From the Sandy Island boat ramp, it's about a two-hour paddle

to the 9,000-acre Sandy Island Nature Preserve, the largest freshwater island on the East Coast, teeming with wildlife such as osprey and eagles.

Shopping opportunities also abound around the Pawleys Island/Litchfield area, with dozens of art galleries and boutiques, including The Hammock Shops, where local artisans make the island's famous rope hammocks.

Restaurants in Pawleys Island range from fine-dining establishments like AAA Three Diamond Frank's Restaurant & Bar, which specializes in delectable steaks, or more casual fare at places like Quigley's Pint & Plate Restaurant, where you can enjoy

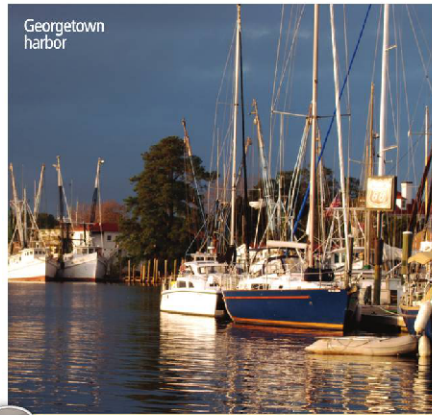


Families enjoying Pawleys Island

local craft beer and local seafood like fresh peel-and-eat shrimp. Pawleys Island also hosts several festivals, including the Pawleys Pavilion Reunion in May.

MURRELLS INLET

At the northernmost section of the Hammock Coast, Murrells Inlet is a sleepy fishing village where you can paddle unspoiled stretches of the river and see remnants of rice plantations and slave cabins partially hidden by towering



Georgetown harbor

Photo courtesy of Paige Sawyer

For an expanded story and video tour of the Hammock Coast, visit AAA.com/Go.

AAA members save \$1 on admission to Brookgreen Gardens in Murrells Inlet. Visit AAA.com/Discounts for details.

moss-laden oak trees.

Local outfitters offer scuba diving trips where you can explore reef systems teeming with fish and shipwrecks.

For deep-sea fishing there are several marinas on the inlet where you can charter a boat and hook everything from sea bass to snapper and grouper. If you'd rather have someone else catch your fish, there's no shortage of great restaurants at Murrells Inlet, which bills itself as the Seafood Capital of the South and even claims it's where hushpuppies were invented.



Samson and the Lion statue at Brookgreen Gardens

Also in Murrells Inlet is Huntington Beach State Park, where you'll find beachfront camping sites and coastal hiking trails. Within the park's 2,500 protected acres are freshwater lagoons, salt marshes and maritime forests, all natural habitats for wildlife such as alligators, eagles, osprey and loggerhead sea turtles.

Brookgreen Gardens, a 9,100-acre attraction between Murrells Inlet and Pawleys Island, features a zoo, sculpture gardens and walking trails.

Left two photos courtesy of SC Department of Parks, Recreation & Tourism