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Simply grand: It's easy to fall under the gentle sway of hammock capital Pawleys Island

By *Steven V. Roberts*
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When I was living in Europe with my family in the mid-1970s, we often rented houses on Greek islands. We relished being able to unpack and unplug, to fall into the rhythm of island life, to walk on the beaches, wander through the villages and wind down the day with a cool white wine and a warm pink sunset.

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When we returned to the United States, we looked for a place that resembled a Greek island but wasn't Martha's Vineyard or Nantucket (we did not want to add cocktail parties to our evening ritual). A friend mentioned Pawleys Island, on the South Carolina coast, which is not really an island at all but a glorified sandbar separated from the mainland by a narrow salt creek and a mile-wide mind-set.

In 1978, we rented a house for a week. One week became two; then we traded up to an ocean view and a third week. Four years ago we bought our own house, and if you ask me to name my favorite place in the world, on many days I would answer Pawleys.

I feel a freedom here, a quiet calmness, that I don't feel anywhere else. Life is reduced to a few simple questions: tennis or boating? Book or movie? Shrimp or barbecue? Walk on the beach with the dogs or leave them home? (Actually, we always take them.) Every family sets its own priorities. Our best friends walk in the early morning, we prefer the evening, and that's the whole point. No rules. Just don't track sand into the house.

Pawleys itself is pristine and protected -- just several hundred private homes, a few small inns, one egregious condo complex, no commercial enterprises. Even if every person in every house goes to the beach at the same time, it's still pretty empty. But just across the causeway, five minutes away, is a 24-hour CVS, an invaluable source of sunscreen and Band-Aids when the house is full of six active grandchildren. And beyond the CVS lies 60 miles of coastline, stretching from Myrtle Beach to Georgetown, harboring a gazillion things to do when everyone overdoses on sun and sand. The area goes by many names -- the Low Country, the Grand Strand, and a new one, Hammock Coast -- but I just think of it as Paradise. Or Home. Pretty much the same thing.

Hammock heaven

When people hear "Pawleys," they often think "hammock." In 1889, a riverboat captain named Joshua Ward wanted a cool place to nap on muggy summer days, so he wove this deep, wide-bodied contraption out of cotton rope and hung it on the back of his boat. During the Depression, Ward's brother-in-law, Arthur Herbert "Doc" Lachicotte, was running a small gift shop for tourists and desperate for business. "We started selling the hammocks because it was the only thing we had," Doc Jr. -- son of the original Doc -- once told me. Today, the hammocks are marketed around the world. They are unusually comfortable -- the mesh design catches the breeze -- but they also serve as a symbol of the region. You actually have the time and the temperament here to use a hammock: to nap, to read, to cuddle. Whatever.

Now 83, Doc the Younger has turned many of his business interests over to his daughter, Lu, but he's still involved in civic and church affairs, and he has more time to practice one of the region's favorite pastimes, flounder fishing. He introduced me to the sport years ago, emphasizing that the key to success is patience. When you feel a bite, wait a minute before setting the hook. On our initial outing through

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On Pawleys Island, a Peaceful Retreat

Pawleys Island and the surrounding South Carolina coast go by many names -- the Low Country, the Grand Strand, and a new one, Hammock Coast -- but longtime Pawleys vacationer Steven V. Roberts simply thinks of it as one of his favorite places in the world.

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the marshlands south of Pawleys, Doc caught the first fish. So skill and experience are essential, I thought. Then our daughter Rebecca, who was 9 at the time, caught the second. Beginners' luck, I thought. Then she caught two more. I almost pushed her overboard.

We've gone out many times with Doc over the years, but one day stands out. My wife, Cokie, and I took our catch home and sauteed it hours later. The fish was so fresh it was intoxicating (although a good white wine probably contributed to our euphoria), and the butter and lemon sauce that Cokie made coated our chins and fingers as we savored each morsel. That flounder remains on our Top 10 list of memorable meals.

When Doc was busy, we'd fish from the bridge over Pawleys Creek or take the kids on a charter boat out of Murrells Inlet. It's easy, even for little ones: bait your hook with squid, drop your line and wait for a bite. We often came home with strings of black sea bass -- good eating, but not quite up to Doc's flounder.

Gullahs and gardens

Before the Civil War, the Low Country was the center of America's rice-growing industry. (To be precise: "Low Country" refers to the South Carolina coast from the Georgia border northward; "Grand Strand" refers to beaches from Myrtle Beach south; the two districts overlap at Pawleys.) Freshwater rivers thread the region and flow into Winyah Bay, near Georgetown, so they're subject to tidal action. Early planters built their Winyah Bay, near Georgetown, so they're subject to tidal action. Early planters built their homes along these waterways, harnessed the tides to flood their paddies and sent their families to Pawleys for the summer to escape the malarial mosquitoes. A few of those homes still exist, and we like to take our small boat on evening cruises and view them from the river, the way they were meant to be seen.

The descendants of the slaves who were brought from Africa through the port of Charleston to work the rice fields are known today as the Gullah people. "Gullah" is a corruption of "Angola," and the Gullah maintain more African traditions than almost any other black community in the States. Food is one example -- the word "gumbo" derives from an Angolan word for okra. Basketry is another.

Highway 17 in Mount Pleasant, a town north of Charleston, is lined with stands that sell handcrafted baskets made by local artisans. Traditionally woven from thick sweet grasses that grow along the shore, they are unusually sturdy and range in tone from wheat to coffee. Years ago, we bought several from a woman named Bea Coaxum, who entertained visitors to Doc Lachicotte's Hammock Shop by weaving her baskets in public. When Bea visited Washington once to represent South Carolina in a craft show, she was taken to the Renwick Gallery and shown an exhibit of baskets from around the world. She saw one at a distance and exclaimed, "That's our work!" meaning the Gullahs. When she got closer, she read the label: The basket came from Angola.

After the rice industry collapsed following the Civil War, huge parcels of land were left undisturbed for decades. They were perfect for building golf courses, and golf is big business here. I don't play, but other family members do, and the grandkids are starting to hit balls at the area's many driving ranges.

But some of the old plantations have been preserved. My wife, who has written several books on Colonial history, is fond of Hopsewee, just Georgetown. It was built in 1740 by Thomas Lynch south of Jr., sometimes called the "forgotten signer" of the Declaration of Independence. With walls of black cypress and floors of heart pine, this stately house on the banks of the North Santee River is the real thing, not a reconstruction. Only five families have owned it in 270 years; it's still in private hands, but public tours are available.

Hampton Plantation, a little north of the town of McClellanville, also dates to the 1740s and was long occupied by the Pinckney family. Eliza Lucas Pinckney, the mother of two Founding Fathers, lived here with her daughter, Harriott, after the Revolutionary War and hosted George Washington in 1791. During his visit, Washington was asked whether a certain oak tree should be cut down to improve the view; he said no, he liked the tree, and the "Washington Oak" still stands today.

Another president, Franklin D. Roosevelt, often visited Hobcaw Barony, an estate of 17,000 acres east of Georgetown, owned by his friend and adviser, Bernard Baruch. Assembled from 11 different plantations, Hobcaw today is a nature preserve and a research station. The main house survives, but I think the high point of any visit is the slave village, the last one remaining in the Carolinas, a reminder that the plantation system thrived on the backs of black labor.

Elsewhere, Archer Huntington, stepson of railroad magnate Collis Huntington, and his wife, the sculptor Anna Hyatt Huntington, found another use for old plantations. In 1931 they combined four of them to create Brookgreen Gardens, a nonprofit garden museum near Murrells Inlet. Its 9,200 acres include manicured gardens, nature trails and a well-crafted exhibit that clearly explains the history of the rice-growing culture.

More than a thousand pieces of outdoor sculpture line the paths and gardens. I find many of them overly huge and heroic, but the small zoo returns you to a more human -- or animal -- scale. The kids enjoy the river otters and several bald eagles that were rescued from the wild. I'm partial to the ingenious cage that gives you a close-up view of the area's astounding bird life -- herons, egrets, ducks of all stripes. There's also a collection of farm animals that were used during the plantation era, and a new butterfly exhibit has become very popular.

You can walk the back trails on your own through ancient oaks and headstones or sign up for guided tours. I like the boat ride that winds through the old rice fields and provides a different perspective on both topography and history.

Across the highway, Huntington Beach State Park, leased by Brookgreen to the state, includes three miles of well-preserved oceanfront, plus forests and marshlands that house 300 bird species (and a few sleepy alligators). Our grandkids (and their parents) like the bike trails that are safely removed from vehicular traffic, and the nature center has a bird-feeding station that gives the little ones a close-up view of the park's feathered residents. For the grown-ups, the park contains Atalaya, the Huntingtons' winter home built in the Moorish style.

Getting off the beach

Even the most devoted beach bums can tire of building castles and jumping waves (at least those with two legs; the dogs will play fetch in the surf forever), so road trips are essential. Myrtle Beach, about 45 minutes north of Pawleys, was once full of down-and-dirty honky-tonks; now it's full of upscale honky-tonks, from giant water slides to a NASCAR SpeedPark, where you can drive your own mock race car.

Our favorite destination on a rainy day is the Ripley's Aquarium, part of a large entertainment complex called Broadway at the Beach. A walk-through tunnel provides close-up views of sharks' teeth, still attached to the sharks, and the stingray petting pool is a big hit (as long as no one falls in). On sunny days, we may head to BB&T Coastal Field to catch a ballgame with the Myrtle Beach Pelicans, the local minor league team.

Charleston is about 75 minutes south of Pawleys, and we've taken several outings to Patriots' Point, a port and museum complex on the north side of the harbor. On one visit we toured the USS Yorktown, a World War II aircraft carrier, and on another, we took a boat out to Fort Sumter, the island outpost where the first shots of the Civil War were fired. The exhibits and ranger talks, coupled with a stunning view of the city from the top of the fort, impart a real sense of naval strategy 150 years ago. Added bonus: on the 40-minute ride out to the fort, we were escorted by several playful dolphins.

A key part of any Low Country vacation is eating, and one word describes the experience: fresh. Seafood is usually caught locally and sold within hours. If you're cooking at home, our favorite source is the Pawleys Island Seafood Market -- the tuna, grouper and flounder are specialties. We often buy shrimp from a fellow who parks his truck near the causeway.

This is also barbecue country, and Hog Heaven, on Highway 17 south of Pawleys, has great ribs, chopped pork and banana pudding. Produce stands dot the highway and a fresh-picked, locally grown tomato tastes completely different from the store-bought variety. Also try the local melons and peaches, but load up on napkins, because the juice will be dripping down your chin. Better yet, just let it rip. Or drip. The Low Country is about ordinary things. A ripe peach. A grilled shrimp. A true putt. A fiery sunset. A cool breeze. And always, a welcoming beach.

For many years we strolled this shore and dreamed of a day when our grandchildren might play here. Now it has happened. The Low Country does that to you. So fair warning: This Place May Be Habit-Forming.

Roberts teaches journalism and politics at George Washington University and is the author most recently of "From Every End of This Earth: 13 Families and the New Lives They Made in America."