

LIVING & ARTS

DISCOVER GEORGIA'S BARRIER ISLANDS

Cumberland keeps pristine beauty

Efforts to preserve, share unspoiled area benefit all who visit, tour park.

By Suzanne Van Atten
svanatten@ajc.com

CUMBERLAND ISLAND – On the southern end of the conch shell-shaped island off the southern coast of Georgia, veteran National Park Service ranger Pauline Wentworth conducts a tour of Dungeness, the massive ruins of a 59-room Queen Anne-style house built by Thomas and Lucy Carnegie in 1885. Constructed from tabby, a building material made from oyster shells and ash, the home was vacated in 1925 and burned in 1959, allegedly a result of arson.

Today it is a ghostly reminder of an era when the Carnegie family owned most of Cumberland Island, and Dungeness – its grounds appointed with rose gardens, fountains, marble patios, gazebos and a swimming pool – was the site of formal dinner parties, croquet tournaments and horse races.

Accessible only by ferry or private boat, Cumberland is a 17.5-mile-long barrier island bereft of commercial enterprises like grocery stores, restaurants and hotels – with one exception, the small, exclusive Greyfield Inn. The only way to get around is by foot or bicycle, available for rent from the National Park Service, and how better to spot the great blue herons, wild turkeys and peregrine falcons that nest here? When she's not giving tours of Dungeness, Wentworth sometimes checks in campers staying at the island's wilderness sites or at Sea Camp, a 16-site campground with facilities tucked beneath the gnarled limbs of live oak trees cloaked in Spanish moss. No more than 300 visitors are permitted on the island at any one time, and day visitors without confirmed overnight reservations are turned back on the afternoon ferry.

Before the National Park Service secured a private contractor to conduct its Lands and Legacies Tour, Wentworth, whose standard issue uniform consists of green slacks, khaki shirt and wide-brimmed campaign hat, used to drive the van. The tour includes a peek inside Plum Orchard Mansion, the 106-room Georgian Revival structure built by Lucy Carnegie for one of her sons. It then travels to the north end of the island to Settlement, once home to the African-American employees of the Carnegie family. Few structures remain there today, but one that does is the tiny First African Baptist Church, where John F. Kennedy Jr. famously married Carolyn Bessette in 1996.

Within sight of what's now called "the Kennedy church" is the weathered, ramshackle home of 74-year-old Carol Ruckdeschel. Since 1973, the former Atlantan has carved out a living on the island, using her strong, ropy hands to build her cabin, as well as grow and catch her own food.

A biologist and environmental activist with icy blue eyes and salt-and-pepper hair twisted into pigtails, Ruckdeschel (it rhymes with turtle shell) is credited for helping establish the Cumberland Island National Seashore in an effort to protect the 36,000-acre island comprised of saltwater marshes, dense maritime forest and powdery white-sand beaches.

She is also a passionate protector of the island's 9,800-acre wilderness area and an outspoken opponent to anything she deems inappropriate usage, including the Lands and Legacies Tour that passes through what was once part of the wilderness.

Lately, she has been advocating for removing the island's 175 or so feral horses. The descendants of domesticated horses abandoned in 1949, the animals appear malnourished and scar the land in their search



Wild horses graze outside the empty shell of Dungeness, home of Thomas and Lucy Carnegie, built in 1885 from tabby, a material made from burned oyster shells. The 59-room house was unoccupied when it burned down in 1959, allegedly a result of arson. CURTIS COMPTON / CCOMPTON@AJC.COM

IF YOU GO
Insider tips

- There are no stores or restaurants on Cumberland Island, so bring food, beverages, refillable water containers, sunscreen, bug spray, rain gear and sturdy walking shoes.
- There is no trash removal service on Cumberland Island. All refuse must be carried off the island and disposed of on the mainland.
- Ferry passage and campsites fill up quickly, so make your reservations early.
- Cumberland Island is a National Seashore, managed by the National Park Service. Entrance is \$4.

How to get there

Cumberland Island Ferry. The ferry makes two round-trip voyages from St. Marys daily, except December-February when it operates Thursdays-Mondays. No cars, pets, bikes or kayaks permitted. Advance reservations recommended. \$28; \$18 children 15 and younger, plus tax, round-trip. Cumberland Island National Seashore Visitor Center, 101 Wheeler St., St. Marys. 912-882-4335, 1-877-860-6787, www.cumberlandislandferry.com.

Private boat. Free docking permitted during daylight hours on the north ends of Dungeness and Sea Camp docks. First-come, first-served. Boats may also be beached. All private boats must be anchored offshore at night.

Sights

Dungeness. Located on the south end of the island near Dungeness dock, the ruins of Thomas and Lucy Carnegie's grand, four-story home is actually the second Dungeness. The original was built on the same spot by Revolutionary War Gen. Nathanael Greene and his free-spirited wife, Catharine "Caty" Littlefield Greene. Visitors can step inside the tabby cold-storage house, walk through a pergola and see the ruins of the pool and recreation center from the Carnegie era. Next door is the renovated Greene-Miller gardener's cottage, built by Caty and her second husband, Phineas Miller. It is the oldest intact structure on the island, built around 1800. Free one-hour ranger-guided tours available 10 a.m. and 12:45 p.m. daily when staff available. Check at Sea Camp Ranger Station.

Plum Orchard Mansion. Built in 1898 near the center of the island by Thomas and Lucy Carnegie as a wedding gift for their son George, Plum Orchard is a 22,000-square-foot classic revivalist mansion appointed with Tiffany lamps, hand-painted wallpaper and an indoor pool. Free, 45-minute tours offered 9 a.m.-noon and 1-4 p.m. Thursdays-Mondays when staff is available. Check at Sea Camp Ranger Station. Plum Orchard is also included on the Lands and Legacies Tour.

First African Baptist Church. Located on the far north end of the island, the small, white clapboard church was established in 1893, but the present structure is circa 1930. Visitors may not enter the church. First African Baptist Church is included on the Lands and Legacies Tour.

Ice House Museum. During the Carnegie era, massive chunks of ice were excavated during winter months from frozen lakes in the northeastern U.S. and shipped to Cumberland Island, where they were stored in this small structure by Dungeness dock. Today it is a modest museum displaying artifacts and photos from the Native American, plantation and industrialist eras of the island. Free.

Lands and Legacies Tour. A five- to six-hour van tour of Cumberland Island starting at Sea Camp Ranger Station and including stops at Plum Orchard Mansion, First Baptist African Church and the privately owned Stafford mansion, built in 1901 by Lucy Carnegie for son William. Advance reservations recommended. \$45 plus tax. 1-877-860-6787.

Recreation

Swim: Swimming is permitted on all beaches.

Bike: Adult bikes are available for rent at Sea Camp Dock on a first-come, first-served basis. \$16 a day, \$20 overnight for campers. Bikes are for road use only and are not permitted on wilderness trails. Greyfield Inn also provides its guests with bicycles.

Fish: Catch trout, bass, crabs, shrimp and more. A state fishing license is required for anyone 16 or older. 1-888-748-6887, www.gofishgeorgia.com.

Hunt: There are six public hunts a year for deer and hogs. Registration is \$35 and is first-come, first-served. 912-882-4336, ext. 253, www.gohuntgeorgia.com.

Birdwatch: 335 species of birds have been identified on the island, including wood storks, osprey and woodpeckers. Bring your binoculars.

Accommodations

Greyfield Inn. Carnegie family portraits, four-poster beds, a vast porch lined with rockers and a clubby library filled with vintage books beckon visitors to the former home of Thomas and Lucy Ferguson's daughter Margaret. Accommodations are provided in 10 guest rooms, some with shared bathrooms, and two cottages. All meals are included. There is a well-stocked honors bar, and picnic lunches are provided upon request. Daily jeep tours are offered, and other outings can be arranged. Private ferry service is provided from Fernandina Beach, Fla. \$425-\$635. 904-261-6408, 1-866-401-8581, www.greyfieldinn.com.

Camping. The National Park Service manages five camping areas. Sites must be reserved in advance and will be assigned upon arrival at Sea Camp Ranger Station. Camping is limited to seven days. Reservations are only accepted over the phone between noon and 4 p.m. daily. Reservations via voicemail will not be accepted. 912-882-4336, option 1.

■ Sea Camp campground is a short walk from Sea Camp dock and features restroom facilities, cold showers and boardwalk access to the beach. There are 16 heavily shaded individual sites, plus two group sites that can accommodate 10-20 people. Each site has a grill, fire ring and picnic table. Carts available at Sea Camp dock, first-come, first-served, to transport gear to site. \$4 per night per person.

■ Stafford campground is 3.5 miles from Sea Camp. It has restrooms, cold showers and fire rings. \$2 per night per person.

■ Wilderness sites include Hickory Hill (5.5 miles from Sea Camp) and Yankee Paradise (7.5 miles from Sea Camp), both located in the island's interior (bring lots of bug spray), and Brickhill Bluff (10.5 miles from Sea Camp) on Brickhill River. There are no facilities and water must be treated. \$2 per night per person.

More information: Cumberland Island National Seashore Visitor Center, 101 Wheeler St., St. Marys. 912-882-4336, www.nps.gov/cuis.

for food. Last year, Cumberland Island National Seashore superintendent Gary Ingram proposed removing the horses, but a public outcry has stalled the effort.

It is an example, at least philosophically, of an issue on which the National Park Service and Ruckdeschel agree. Oftentimes, they are in opposition. It is an uneasy relationship that has Ruckdeschel openly criticizing the agency for some of its

practices, such as controlled burns in the wilderness area, and then delivering a bag full of grapefruits plucked from a tree in her yard to the rangers at Sea Camp.

While Ruckdeschel and the National Park Service play out their awkward *pas de deux* over wilderness management, well-heeled guests arrive by private ferry from Fernandina Beach, Fla., to loll around the oversized porch swings at Greyfield

Inn, waiting for a bell to summon them to dinner. Operated by Carnegie heir Oliver "Mitty" Ferguson and his gracious wife, Mary Jo, Greyfield Inn was built in 1901 as a private home for one of Lucy Ferguson's daughters. In 1962, it became an inn, offering visitors the opportunity to sleep like a steel magnate's heirs in the 10-guestroom mansion and two cottages. During the day, guests have 200 acres of private



Biologist and environmental activist Carol Ruckdeschel (from left), visitor Elizabeth Wylie and National Park Service Ranger Pauline Wentworth eat lunch at Ruckdeschel's home on the north end of Cumberland Island. SUZANNE VAN ATTEN / SVANATTEN@AJC.COM.



Georgia's largest barrier island at 36,400 acres and 16.6 beach miles, Cumberland Island is one of the most spectacular natural habitats in the Northern Hemisphere. CURTIS COMPTON / CCOMPTON@AJC.COM

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DISCOVER GEORGIA'S BARRIER ISLANDS

An experiential travel guide to the coast with tips on how to get there and what to do. Go to specials.myajc.com/barrier-islands to learn more.

ABOUT THE STORY

Inspired by past Personal Journeys set in the Georgia Barrier Islands and AJC photographer Curtis Compton's stunning nature photography from the area, I embarked on a two-week journey this spring, island-hopping along the state's coast. In addition to putting 1,314 miles on my trusty Volvo, I rode on ferries, motor boats, a horse-drawn carriage, the back of a pickup truck and paddled a kayak. I slept in a sleeping bag and ate at a five-star restaurant. I saw wild horses, deer, American bald eagles, gators and too many armadillos to count. And I met some fascinating people who helped guide my way, including park ranger Pauline Wentworth, environmentalist Carol Ruckdeschel, Southeast Adventure Outfitters guide Matthew Morton, Stanley Walker with the Department of Natural Resources on Sapelo, Miguel Robledo with Three Oaks Farm in Jekyll Island, Capt. Fran Lapolla of Savannah Coast EcoTours and Will Canepa, bar manager at Tybee Island Fish Camp. I owe them all my deepest gratitude.

Suzanne Van Atten
Lead Features Content Manager
svanatten@ajc.com

ABOUT THE REPORTER AND PHOTOGRAPHER

Suzanne Van Atten is Lead Features Content Manager for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution. Her duties include editing Personal Journeys and managing the AJC's books coverage. She is also a travel writer and author of "Moon Puerto Rico," now in its fourth edition, and "Moon San Juan, Vieques and Culebra," in its second edition.

Curtis Compton joined the AJC as a photo editor in 1993 before returning to the field as a staff photographer. Previously, he worked for the Gwinnett Daily News, United Press International and the Marietta Daily Journal. He has a bachelor's degree from the University of Georgia and won a World Hunger Award for his coverage of the famine in Sudan.

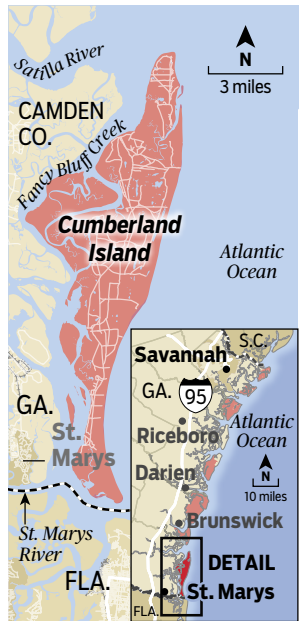


land spanning from marsh to coast on which to play.

The National Park Service, Ruckdeschel and the Greyfield Inn represent three primary forces – tourism, preservation and commerce – that have shaped Cumberland Island's recent history, and sometimes those interests have been at odds. At the core of their differences lies the tension between preservation and accessibility. Protecting the wilderness from man's encroachment while still making it accessible for the public's enjoyment is a knotty endeavor, and opinions differ on how best to achieve that fragile balance. The passion with which each of the stakeholders defends their various stances speaks to the unparalleled, pristine beauty of this spectacular island that – despite human presence – appears for the most part untouched by mankind. The rarity of that and the desire to preserve and share it seem more than worthy of their convictions. In the end, so far, visitors have reaped the benefits of their efforts.

Cumberland Island

Cumberland Island is Georgia's southernmost barrier island, accessible by ferry from St. Marys.



ROBERT CALZADA / STAFF

COMING MONDAY

» Our Discover Georgia's Barrier Islands series continues with Sea Island.