

Spring Island Sets the Bar High on Hilton Head

In the Carolina Lowcountry near Hilton Head Island, the landscape is brimming with exceptional golf experiences. But a much-coveted, hard-to-come-by invite to Spring Island should be at or near the top of anyone's list.



17th Hole at Old Tabby

If you had a thousand bucks for every golf-real estate community within 10 miles of the Hilton Head Bridge, you'd have accumulated enough loot to put a sizeable down payment on a modest home in many of them. And while there are numerous prize winners among the scores of contenders, none are more intriguing than bucolic Spring Island, situated about 10 miles north of U.S. 278 and well off the beaten path in the mellow little burg of Okatie.

Spring Island is just another golf-real estate community like Smith & Wollensky is just another steakhouse, or Meryl Streep just another Oscar winner. This is the standard-bearer, the one to which other communities are held in comparison. While many of its neighbors offer more golf and perhaps shinier amenity packages with sundry bells and whistles, nothing is better than Spring Island.

Arnold Palmer's Old Tabby Links is the golf centerpiece of Spring Island. The hard truth is "The King" has never really been considered golf-architectural royalty, certainly not in comparison to other golf-stars-turned-architects like Crenshaw, Weiskopf and a guy named Nicklaus. But Palmer did some exquisite work at this woody retreat, particularly after a recent renovation, and each

delightful circuit of the bucolic and immaculately conditioned gem reinforces the notion that this mostly undiscovered jewel is at the pinnacle of the region's pecking order. But here's the *real* news: There's much more to Spring Island than golf.



Live Oak Alley at Spring Island

Old Tabby Links, compelling experience that it is, is little more than a tablecloth on a football field in the scheme of things, because Spring Island in total involves than 3,000 acres of live oaks and Spanish moss, tall marshland grasses, surrounding tidal creeks and rivers, freshwater and saltwater ponds.

There are residents, to be certain, but not nearly as many as there might have been since preserving the island's biological integrity was what appealed most to developer Jim Chaffin of Chaffin/Light Associates. In the late 1980s, Chaffin heard of a proposed development plan for Spring Island that called for the construction of 5,000 homes and two golf courses. But he envisioned something quite different - a low-impact community with nature as its core.

Today, Spring Island has just 410 home sites. In addition, 1,200 acres were set aside for a nature preserve, allowing residents to appreciate Chaffin's description of the island development: "Spring Island is a park with a community in it, as opposed to a community with a park in it." The developer's commitment and ultimate realization of his original plan has earned Spring Island the prestigious Urban Land Institute's Sensitive Development Award.



The Final Hole at Old Tabby

It would be disingenuous to say that whacking a white ball through these marvelous meadows isn't one of Spring Island's primary appeals. But other activities abound, keeping long-time director of golf Bill Sampson's pro shop buzzing, but not overrun. Regarding the other outdoor diversions, fishermen drop lines in 20 freshwater ponds, where bass and bream abound. In the saltwater ponds, redfish, flounder and striped bass are the prey. The rivers and creeks surrounding Spring Island are home to Cobia, tarpon, red fish and sea trout, while 30 minutes by boat to Port Royal Sound and the Atlantic Ocean afford the chance to catch blue marlin, Wahoo, king mackerel and dolphin.

An equestrian center covers 30-plus acres, with an additional 30 miles of riding trails. There is quail hunting and target shooting among other outdoor pursuits.

Besides all these back-to-nature amenities, golf is still one of Spring Island's primary appeals. Holes like the ninth - a par-5 with the namesake "old tabby" remnants of a plantation house adjacent to the green, and the all-world 17th - a beautiful and treacherous waterside par-3, provide playing thrills for members and their fortunate guests.



No. 9 at Old Tabby

The housing around Old Tabby Links, particularly on the outward nine, has a "Where's Waldo?" quality. They are out there to be sure, but camouflaged within the deep green foliage, and hard to spot unless you are specifically looking for architectural styles. The most notable edifice on the property is the remains of that old plantation house close by the ninth, those walls giving the golf course its distinctive name.

The recent upgrades have further enhanced the golf experience. "One of the major focuses of our golf course renovation was to re-grass the greens with a more modern strain, and move our greens an average of about 10 yards to alleviate shading problems," begins Sampson, who has been on the job for nearly 20 years. "Because the philosophy here is to offer as little disturbance as possible to the natural setting, there was very little support regarding cutting down the number of trees necessary to allow more light, particularly as many of them were magnificent live oaks, and other specimen trees."

Other subtleties now in place include adding more contours to greens that were formerly a bit flatter, and the addition of shaved areas around the putting surfaces, allowing for a variety of recovery options. While the previous method was simply a "hack-out" from thick rough, now players can pitch, putt, flop or bump their way to the pins.



Spring Island Equestrian Center

"Some greens have gotten larger, others smaller, still others with some added elevation," continues the Tennessee native. "The driving force behind the renovation was to update our antiquated irrigation system, which now uses less water overall, and can be targeted more effectively."

The bunkers were the subject of another major overhaul. The square footage of the traps was actually cut in half, from 140,000 to 70,000 square feet, yet, despite the shrinkage, many were repositioned to make them more penal for wayward shots. In addition, a gravel base was installed beneath the sand to promote better drainage.



Sunset Falls on a Marsh at Spring Island

(Photos are by Evan Schiller Photography)

While it's hard to imagine a serene property like this to be in any more of an organic state than what exists already, the fact is there are now far greater numbers of indigenous plants and shrubbery that have been planted on the premises since the course renovation. And while fairways are roomier - thanks mainly to the aforementioned reduction of bunkering, the inclusion of these species means there's less overall grass on the course, which now requires less water than the prior standard.

All said, Spring Island's Old Tabby Links continues to raise the bar in regards to beauty, sustainability and tranquility, serving as a model for any golf and real estate community in the Southeast.

For more information, visit www.springisland.com/golf.html.